

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**“An Ethnographic Analysis of HIV/AIDS in the Venda
Region of South Africa: Politics, Peer Education and
Music.”**

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD. in Social Anthropology

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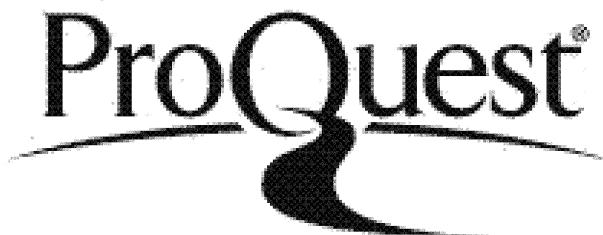
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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

François

This work is dedicated to my mum (Monica), dad (Les), and sister (Jennifer), without whom it simply would not have been possible. For your constant support, and great sense of humour, I am truly grateful.

And

In loving memory of
Humbulani Nekavhambe,
who was with me every step of the way,
but never made it to see the final product.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the dynamics of HIV/AIDS in the Venda region of South Africa through an exploration of post-apartheid traditionalism and the anthropology of knowledge at the juncture of planned AIDS interventions. It argues that current policies of peer education act to reinforce the patriarchal Venda aetiology through which men and older women explain sexually transmitted infections in terms of blood related taboos and the build up of pollution. This has resulted in a situation where many Venda men are more concerned with *who* they sleep with, rather than how "safe" the encounter may be, and has reinforced or even given rise to widely held idea that condoms cause AIDS.

By looking at AIDS education through the political economy of traditional leadership in the region, the thesis locates concepts of AIDS, musical performance, power, generational authority, death and secrecy in the context of a post-apartheid struggle for the consolidation of political power between the royal houses of Mphephu and Tshivhase. This has exacerbated historical tensions between the rival centres of power, and encouraged the implementation of policies through which the ANC doctrine of African renaissance has taken centre stage. It argues that, in this context, official attempts to increase the frequency of female initiation schools have bolstered the generational authority of older women and increased the extent to which HIV/AIDS is understood through the "folk model" of blood taboos and pollution. Although peer education creates a space in which younger women – mostly through the singing of songs – promote biomedical notions of sexual health and healing, this space should not be conceptualised simply as a site of "resistance" against these structural forms of authority. It also provides them with a basis for securing positions of employment in health-related government programmes, and as such acts as a potential vehicle for upward mobility among the rural poor. Their desire to change the social/sexual health environment is thus matched by their desire to transcend and move away from it, given that it constructs them as vectors of the virus.

EXTENDED (POST-VIVA) ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to find an explanation as to why, in the Venda region of South Africa, groups of young women engaged in processes of AIDS education have been socially constructed as vectors of the disease. It argues that current policies of peer education act to reinforce the patriarchal Venda aetiology through which men and older women explain sexually transmitted infections in terms of blood related taboos and the build up of pollution. This has resulted in a situation whereby many Venda men are more concerned with *who* they sleep with, rather than how "safe" the encounter may be, and has reinforced or even given rise to the widely held notion that condoms cause AIDS.

The ethnographic data presented here draws largely on a range of processes that are designed to facilitate the transfer of different types of knowledge in attempts to secure productive and reproductive capacities to act on the world. They represent various dimensions of engagement with a perceived crisis of social reproduction in the postcolony and with diverse localised manifestations of the liberalisation of the post-Apartheid state and economy. At the intersection between this current neoliberal moment and the perception of life-crises, contestations over the (re)production of value have become fundamental to the lived experience of daily life in the former Bantustan. Recourse to power is central to this, and power's ambivalent qualities ensure that the values produced here are at once achieved, contested and reinforced.

The thesis testifies to this, drawing out localised dynamics of the post-apartheid moment through a variety of ethnographic encounters. These reveal the micro-politics of individuals and groups, engaged in attempts to create and recreate connections with seemingly contradictory – but nonetheless essential – forms of power. In this vein, King Kennedy Tshivhase's decision to promote "tradition" in the battle for paramountcy against his historical rival – through a dominant discourse in which state sovereignty trumps traditional authority – has seen chiefly legitimacy tested through the concurrent scrutiny of the state, the kingship and the citizenry. As a direct result of this "traditionalism", further contestations in value – to be found beneath the realm of national political influence – have erupted between ancestral and bio-scientific forms of knowing about, and dealing with, sexually transmitted infections such as HIV that lurk within polluted bodies; given life

by "dirty blood". The thesis demonstrates the importance of ethnographic approaches to patterns of speaking – and not speaking – about such taboo subjects, and builds a model for understanding the current failure of AIDS education projects through the analysis of stigma and secrecy in which avoidance of open conversation about AIDS must be seen in terms of "degrees of separation" that create distance between the speaker and immanent or actual death. Whilst current approaches to AIDS stigma emphasise the ways in which stigmatisation reproduces unequal power relations, the current study points towards the inherent ambivalence of AIDS stigma, even its potentially beneficial qualities for those engaged in AIDS education – and who are not necessarily HIV positive.

The thesis exposes the perceived crisis of social reproduction, in this context, as a dualistic process hinging, on the one hand, on the desire for continuity in social, political and economic process, with the urgently felt need, on the other, to secure healthy physical, sexual, intimate relations. Moreover, this perceived crisis is being played out in a moment of emergency: a breach of normative relations in which sex and death have recently become inseparable and neoliberal policies constitute a challenge to securing a stable future; stripping men of their socially recognised recourse to masculinity through massive reductions in the extent of migrant labour whilst removing remittances from the household economies that were once managed by "stay at home" wives. In this context, extensive state welfare competes with an often violent criminality, whilst the lucky few conduct opulent lifestyles, made all the more envious for their public displays of capitalist success.

The ethnography here, however, points to ways in which such a crisis is not necessarily experienced as incommensurable contradiction between diffuse poles of power or incompatible understandings of daily existence, but can appear in the guise of – or can be converted into – opportunity. Through initiatives that seek to seize a kernel of control over – and take advantage of – the neoliberal moment among the rural poor, material and symbolic entrepreneurial activities have become pervasive. Indeed, in the absence of significant or realistic structural frameworks through which to achieve legitimate economic viability in the post-apartheid era, the rural poor have been left with little option but to engage in diffuse forms of opportunist activity, through which they may inadvertently reinforce the perception of crisis.

The thesis validates such an assertion through recourse to various ethnographic accounts – all of which are intrinsically connected, but which also represent separate engagements with the processes and pressures of this neoliberal moment in the course of South Africa's "development". Thus, King Tshivhase's "traditionalism" – whilst of its self representative of the royal polities' strategy for the consolidation of "traditional" authority – has given rise to numerous "community-led" projects in which rationalised and commoditised versions of female initiation are invoked by groups of women in a quest to rediscover their ability to act meaningfully on the world, and to earn a living simultaneously by selling their knowledge of tradition. Through moral panics, poison scares are blamed on inventive – if immoral – individuals who convert tea-estate fertilizer and body parts into deadly toxin in exchange for unknown material or spiritual favours. At the same time, embedded in this landscape, the key players in this account – the peer group educators – are involved in the entrepreneurial brokering of symbolic capital (rooted in a presumed experience of sexual illness) in a market through which the parastatal positioning of so-called non-governmental organisations makes it very likely that they, out of all the actors in this account, will eventually achieve "government" employment. In doing so, the peer educators sing songs about AIDS, advertising their fluency in biomedicine and drawing on diverse genres of music. This has contributed to the (re)production of AIDS – and those who tout their knowledge of it – as multi-vocal signifiers taking on and reflecting different interpretations within power struggles that cut across and exacerbate divisions of gender and generation for the possibility of, and control over, a productive, healthy, future.

The peer educators, although seemingly strung into historically constituted patriarchal structures, thus engage in symbolic transactions, trading their assumed experience and history of sex work and disease for new, more employable, identities from the local NGO and their international funders. The peer educators' desire to change the social/sexual health environment is thus matched by their desire to transcend and move away from it, given that it constructs them as vectors of the virus. AIDS is thus seen to epitomise and reflect symbolically the ambivalence of free market forces in this neoliberal moment: it "works" to provide some with a source of new opportunity and aspiration to social mobility, leading ultimately to a "real job" and a better life – but it is more likely to instigate social and physical decay through the obstruction of processes that ought to ensure productive and reproductive capacities.

The current thesis, then, is a localised account of the extent to which pressures derived from the liberalisation of the post-apartheid state and economy contribute to a perceived crisis of reproduction. It achieves this by analysing the processes through which expectations and frustrations can be mediated, contested and converted into material and symbolic opportunities, and scrutinizing the far-reaching implications of this for AIDS education programmes and those who volunteer within them.

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In Venda:

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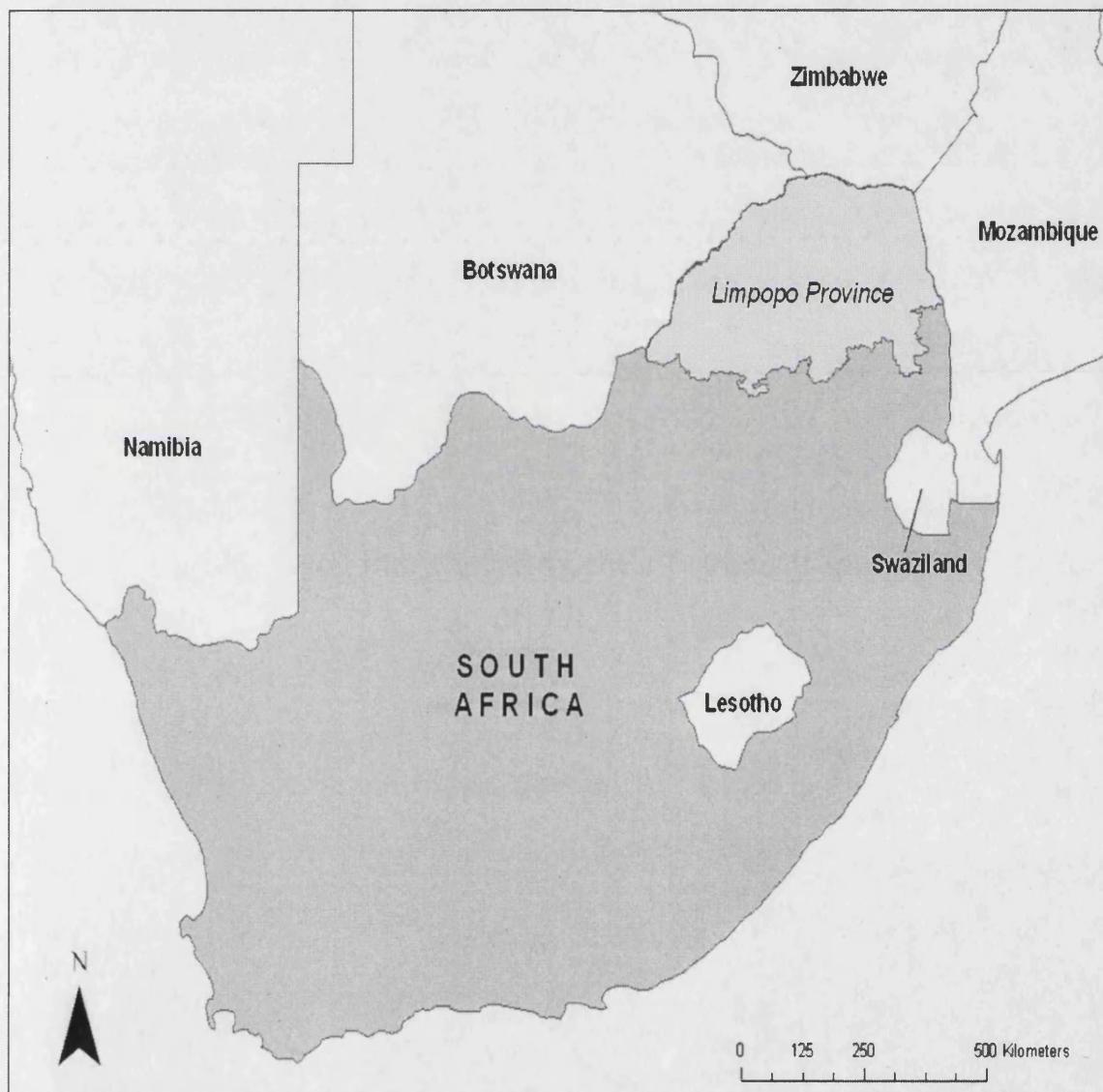
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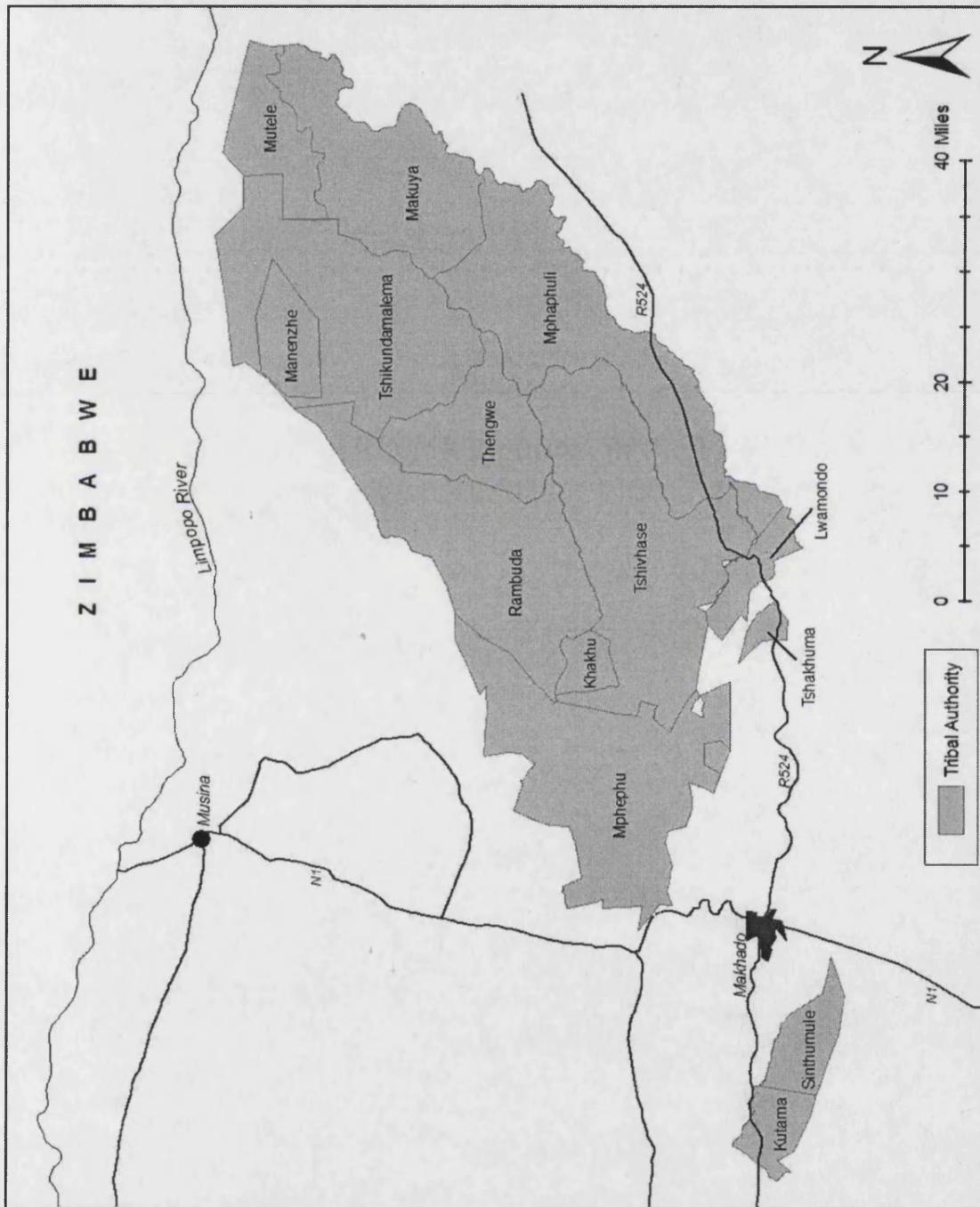
Map 1

Limpopo Province (Incorporating the Former Homeland of Venda) in South Africa



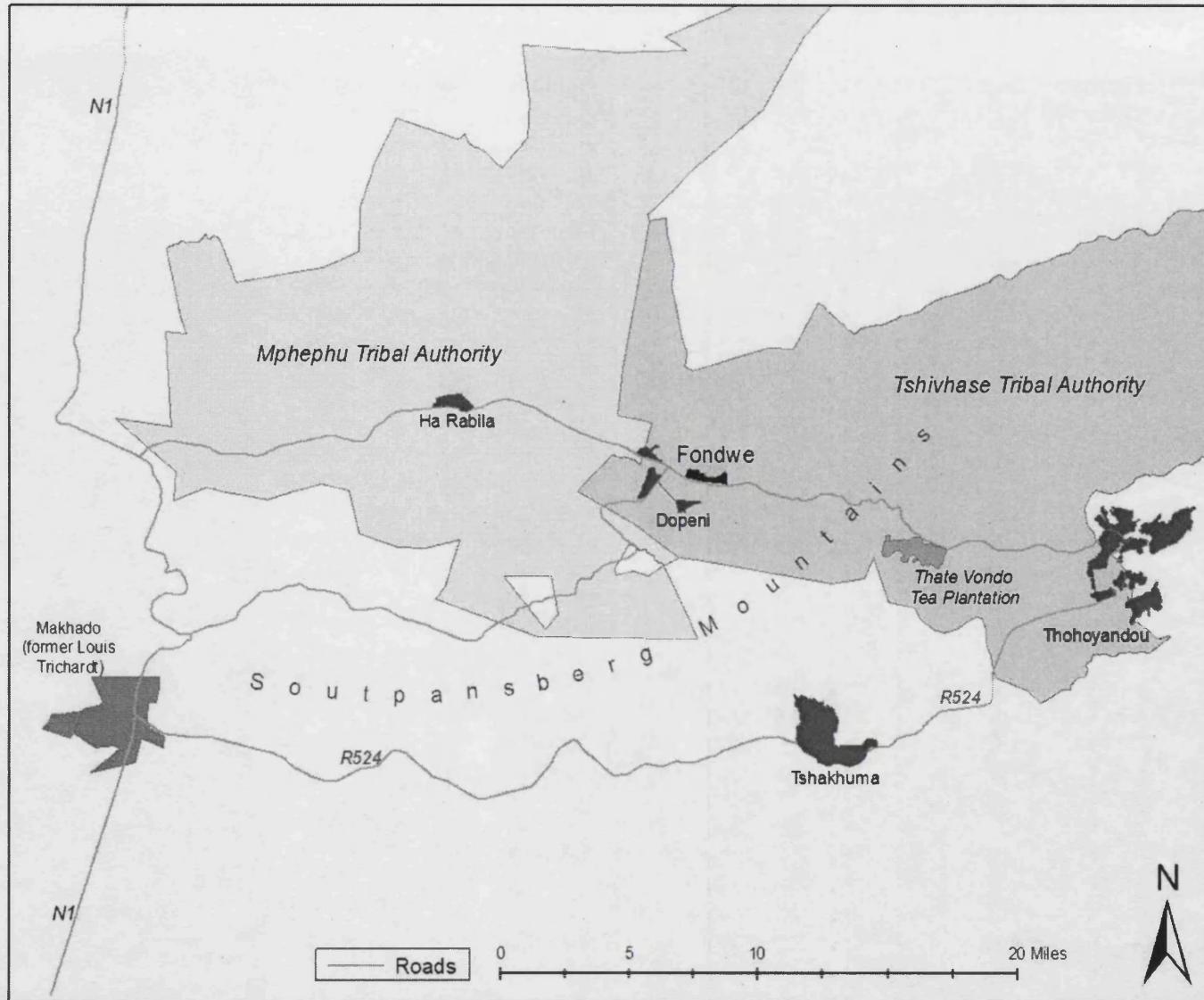
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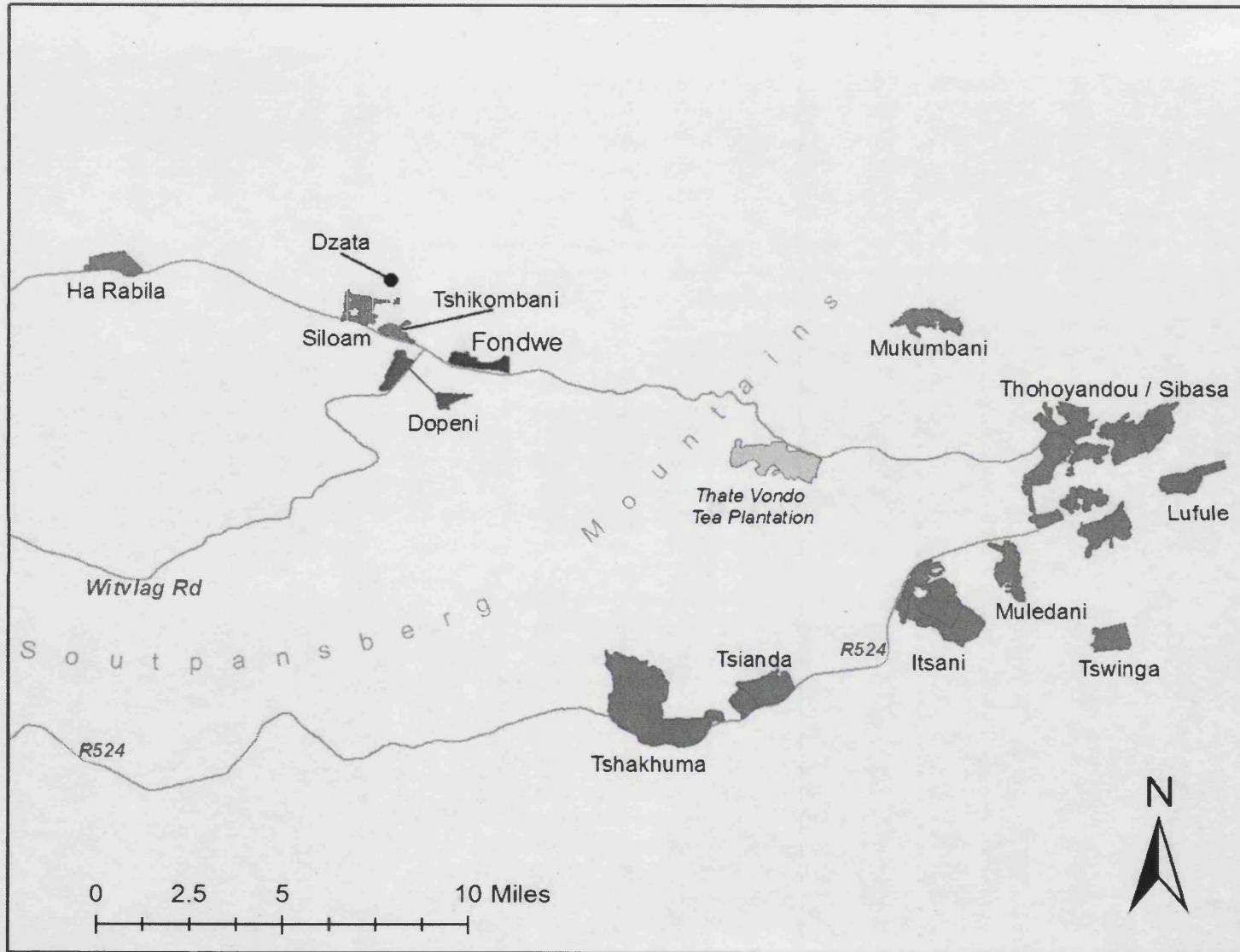
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The long, straight highway from Johannesburg to Venda is peppered with large bill-boards on the roadside that entice drivers with promises of what lies ahead. From the outskirts of Pretoria they read; “Limpopo: A different world, only five hours away!”; “Venda, Experience the Land of Legend”; “Four hours to reach the *REAL* Africa” until, eventually, on arrival, a sign proclaims “Welcome to Africa’s Eden!” On the bill-boards, pictures of a *Domba* girls’ initiation “python dance” fade into picturesque snap-shots of village life with pristine pottery and magical waterfalls that feed the ancient and “sacred” Lake Fundudzi. Superimposed on this idyllic scene, artistic impressions of wildlife allude to a border with the Kruger National Park, another untouched corner of Africa. Visitors may be forgiven for thinking that they are journeying into the past, to a forgotten, mystical land where humans live in harmony with nature and time stands still.

In marketing the Limpopo Province¹, and specifically the Venda region, as an authentic “African experience”, the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism have tapped into a deep-seated and widely held stereotype that portrays Vhavenda people (sing. Muvenda) as mysterious, insular and culturally unique. Several overlapping factors have contributed to this. Geographically, the Venda region nestles behind the Soutpansberg mountain range in the extreme north east of the country. This peripheral location has led to the propagation of a “myth of Venda isolation” (Ralushai 1977) through which it is widely asserted by Vhavenda and non-Venda alike that they have historically resisted outside influence. This is evidenced by recourse to the well known anecdote that, during the *mfecane* in the 1800s, Shaka’s regiments were unable to penetrate the inhospitable terrain or conquer the cunning Venda warriors who hid high in mountain gullies and crushed the approaching Zulu aggressors by rolling large boulders down into their path.

¹ Limpopo Province includes the previous homelands of Venda, Lebowa and Gazankulu. The transition from apartheid to democracy is taken up in the next chapter.

The stereotypical representation of Venda as a remote and mystical hinterland is exacerbated by demographic and linguistic factors. Constituting just over one million people – only 2.3% of the total South African population (Statistics South Africa 2003) – Vhavenda are second only to Ndebele as the country's smallest ethnic group. Unlike the Ndebele language, however, Tshivenda (or Luvenda) is not of Nguni origin, but is from “the north” (*vhukaranga*) and has more affinity with the vast Niger-Congo linguistic cluster that includes Shona in Zimbabwe and Lozi in Zambia. For this reason, Tshivenda is not easily understood by isiZulu or Xhosa speakers, and Venda people in Johannesburg are often mistakenly referred to as *makwerekwere*.² Moreover, although many Vhavenda were recruited to become migrant labourers in the gold mines on the Rand and diamond mines near Pretoria, they often disguised their true ethnicity for fear of minority victimisation and thus were largely excluded from studies of the South African migrant work force (cf. Moodie 1994 or McNamara 1980). The small group that originated in distant mountains and who seemed to speak in a foreign tongue yet could blend into the cityscape were – and still are – treated with suspicion and renowned for their supposedly secretive character. This gave rise, *inter alia*, to the notion that Vhavenda are mythical masters of the occult who possess an extraordinary ability to invoke witchcraft – a conviction that has been reinforced by the recent increase in ritual murders in the area.

The framing of Venda as a part of “Africa’s Eden” is intriguing. In one sense it can be seen to represent a bountiful garden: the omnipresent agricultural industry that is the cornerstone of Limpopo’s economic contribution to the country. Whilst most of this commercial scale farming is to be found on land that was part of the old Republic, it also speaks to the remarkably fertile, bright red soil that nurtures a selection in virtually every Venda homestead of avocado, mango, banana, orange, cherry, lemon and pawpaw trees, the fruits of which are either consumed by the family or sold at one of the numerous roadside markets. After the seasonal winter rain from December through February, this transforms the landscape into a vibrant mountainous collage of deep greens and rich reddish brown. To the far north and east, where sporadic villages mark the end of the Soutpansberg range, the deep greens fade into a dryer, dusty savanna that leads east into the Kruger National Park and north across the Limpopo River to Zimbabwe.

² This is a relatively recent derogatory term for non-South African black people, particularly those from the Niger-Congo area. Whilst Nguni and Niger-Congo languages share a certain amount of vocabulary, the grammatical structure and tonal qualities of the languages differ significantly.

Despite this natural abundance and fertility, daily life in Venda displays many of the hardships of that in other parts of rural South Africa. There have been recent government attempts to provide basic services, water and electricity, but supplies remain infrequent and unreliable. The burden of providing fuel and water is borne by women and children who have little option but to make daily trips to collect them. With few exceptions, roads and the combi-taxis that colonise them are in various states of disrepair. Opportunities for employment are scarce and school leavers generally aspire to work "in town" (*doroboni*) or, increasingly, "abroad" (*seli ha lwange* – lit. across the sea). Whilst some achieve this and enjoy the benefits that come with it, rising unemployment has led to a decrease in successful attempts to find work "in town" and an increase of suspicious jealousy towards those who do.

Staying alive in such a setting either leaves people adrift or leads them into complex webs of dependency and obligation. Groups of young men, denied the formal employment that was available to their fathers, navigate towards the peri-urban areas of Sibasa and Thohoyandou, often in search of an informal "piece job". In such settings they are likely to be tempted by the rewards offered to those who engage in petty, or serious, crime. The fathers of these men, retired from their lives as migrant labourers, spend time with church friends or in beer halls. Older men and women, unable to rely on their sons' earnings as they'd expected, depend on state pensions: a basic income that they increasingly collect along with a child support grant for the care of their grandchildren. Young, unmarried women often strike up intimate relationships with older, richer, married men who may be teachers, civil servants, taxi-drivers or policemen. They frequently fall pregnant and become dependent on child welfare grants and on "maintenance" from the father who rarely sticks around. This drastically reduces a family's prospects of receiving bride wealth (*lobola*) but it does not entirely remove the possibility of marriage, or of finding informal employment. When a woman does marry she must learn the difficult skill of balancing her obligations to feed and clothe her children and spouse against her need to connect – mostly through the church – with her friends and female associates.

And yet despite these difficult circumstances there is a remarkably optimistic climate of hope and faith that "things will come right". For the second smallest linguistic group in South Africa, Tshivenda speakers have produced an exceptional number of successful

public figures in the post-apartheid era. These include the Reverend Simon Farisani (struggle hero and Speaker of the Limpopo Provincial House), Sydney Mufamadi (Minister of Provincial and Local Government), Joel Netshitenzhe (former head of Government Communications, currently head of the Policy Unit, alleged to have more political influence than anyone else in the country [Calland 2006]), Cyril Ramaphosa (former NUM leader and now prominent businessman) and popular musician Lucky Dube. Like other men who work "in town", these individuals maintain strong familial connections in Venda. On visits home, they are known to address schools, community gatherings and public holiday celebrations. Through this, they have become powerful role models for young and old Vhavenda with aspirations of joining the growing African middle classes. Possibly because of the visibility and inspirational character of these key figures, for every youngster in Venda who gets involved in crime there is another who has taken a loan and started a car-wash, opened a small spaza shop from his/her house (cf. Spiegel 2005), fixes shoes or watches, sells phone calls and "loose draw" cigarettes at taxi stops, braids hair, has started a non-governmental organisation (NGO) or offered his/her voluntary services to an existing one.

This sense of optimism is reflected in Venda patterns of electoral support. The vast majority of the inhabitants of Venda remain loyal to the African National Congress (ANC). In the area covered by the Vhembe District Municipality, under whose political administration the former homeland of Venda falls, over 75% of votes were recorded in favour of the ANC in the 2000 municipal elections and in 2006 this increased to become 86% (IEC South Africa 2007).³ The party's popularity, however, is rooted as much in historical allegiance and the lack of a credible political alternative as it is a measure of the success of the strategies adopted by its leader, and the country's president since 1999, Thabo Mbeki.

This mixture of optimism and hardship evident in Venda life is paralleled at the national level, where growth, stability and prosperity are accompanied by unemployment and inequality. Mbeki and his advisors have pursued policies of liberalisation designed to encourage international confidence in the South African Rand: largely successfully if one

³ Municipalities are sub-divisions of local government that are divided into wards. They operate one level below provincial structures and two levels below national government. Since 1994, South Africa has adopted proportional representation as its electoral system; with three sub-divisions of government to vote for this has proved to be an exceptionally complex and clumsy political arrangement.

measures success in terms of economic growth and of the small but highly visible upper class and middle classes that have benefited from the reforms. The turn towards neoliberalism was marked by a seminal shift in policy. This saw a move from emphasis on the “people centred”, socially-democratic Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the comparatively more conservative, “top down”, macro-economic Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR). This led to the privatisation of social services, reduction in social spending and a liberalisation of trade relations. Significant economic and social progress has certainly been made since 1994. For example in 2001, 4.1 million households were living “in poverty”. By 2004 this had fallen to 3.6 million. Provision has, however, been sporadic and areas such as Venda have been sidelined in favour of more politically volatile regions such as KwaZulu-Natal, parts of the Eastern Cape and various urban townships. Thus, developments have been uneven, but progress has been made and although opportunities for some have not translated into opportunities for all, there has been a genuine attempt to redistribute wealth through state apparatus. This is evidenced by South Africa’s welfare system that is exceptional among middle-income and developing countries. The combination of old age pensions, disability grants, child and support grants have led some to suggest that policy may be taking a swing back to the socially democratic principles of the RDP, or even that the ANC may be attempting to steer a “third way” between the left and the right.⁴

Yet, although black economic empowerment (BEE), has seen the promotion of some members of the African elite into positions of power, it has not provided substantial gains for the majority.⁵ A general trend towards neoliberalism has inevitably been accompanied by formal job losses. Indeed, unemployment has remained, according to the Labour Force Survey (2004), at around 40% since 1998, and this has been accompanied by the seemingly insatiable rising tide of crime in the country whereby the per capita incarceration rate is the highest in the continent (Sloth-Nielsen 2007). South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world (May *et al.* 2000: 26-28).

⁴ Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 314); Daniel *et al.* (2005); Southall (2005: 458); Mbali (2004); Southall (2007: 1); Seekings (2005 in Nattrass 2007: 179).

⁵ BEE has been defined as “the increase of black ownership, control and management of state, parastatal and private activity in the formal sector” (Southall 2005: 457). “African elite” here refers to the class of African capitalists, many of whom were supported by the apartheid regime as a means to promote business in the bantustans as a functional buffer between white capitalism and mass black poverty.

Set against this backdrop, daily life in Venda is characterised by broadly similar socio-economic and political trends to those found in other parts of rural South Africa (cf. for example Oomen 2005 in Sekhukhuneland, Ngwane 2004 in Transkei, White 2004 in KwaZulu-Natal). Nonetheless, whilst broad national trends may be important, this is not to suggest that Venda is bereft of distinguishing socio-cultural features. Indeed, *following* national trends, and as the road-side posters partly suggested, Venda “culture” and “tradition” have become re-integrated into everyday life in a very particular way in the post-apartheid era. Much of this so-called tradition, familiar to students of anthropology through its recording by early ethnographers and given legitimacy by the apartheid regime, has taken a central role in the recent move towards “traditionalism”.⁶

Here we can take an alternative reading of “Africa’s Eden” in terms of the sense of a beginning: a journey to the dawn of creation. But the pervasiveness of “traditional culture” in contemporary Venda life parallels the everyday use of modern technologies like mobile phones, computer cafes and solar panels. Indeed, much of daily life is experienced through a series of apparent contradictions. The promotion of economic development is set against distinctly underdeveloped circumstances; the promise to provide basic amenities against the resounding failure to deliver; the reassurance of a “better life for all” against the reality of a growing wealth gap; the experience of political freedom against the common occurrence of violent crime; extensive welfare provision against exposure to neoliberal policies and high levels of unemployment; the casting of votes in a democratic election against the reality of living under the influence of traditional authority, and the constant reminder on advertising billboards to “love life” against the death of family and friends from AIDS.

AIDS, mentioned only in the final breath of this statement about the contradictions and hardships of life in Venda, is also one of the most pressing. The broader picture of Venda life painted here forms a backdrop, a means to contextualise the topic which lies at the heart of this thesis: AIDS, and attempts to combat and explain it by various means. The rate of AIDS infection is now such that death is a constant presence for the middle and

⁶ The early ethnological accounts of Venda can be found in Wessman (1908) Stayt (1931), Van Warmelo (1932, 1948 a-c, 1949, 1967) and Lestrade (1930 a-b), 1932, 1949. I refer to these accounts at relevant points throughout the thesis.

younger generations: the adult children of the pensioners mentioned earlier and their children in turn. Weekends in Venda are an ill-fitting mix of beerdrinks, football matches and funerals, whilst week nights are taken up with prayer services (*thabeloni*) for the deceased or with preparation for the burial service and feast on Saturdays. Talking about death is a risky business, and the proliferation of funerals has been met with an eerie avoidance of open conversation about their cause.

Partly prompted by this health crisis and the associated moral panic, some groups of older men and women, at the forefront of a cultural revival undertaken with chiefly backing, have become ritual experts at initiation schools through which they seek to reinforce social and moral order. The famous *Domba* python dance and the other musical performances of girls' initiation have been asserted as arenas for the propagation of traditional mores through which, some assert, the illness might be combated. Contesting this, groups of younger women, employed as educators by development and health NGOs, are asserting their own versions of the musical tradition, as a means to inform the ignorant about the bio-medics of sexual disease transmission. Strategically utilised, contested and refuted, different sets of values and ideas, each linked to its own set of practices yet also floating free of these, have come to the fore.

This thesis, then, is concerned with the ways in which post-apartheid traditionalism, under the guidance of chiefly politics, intersects with the anthropology of knowledge at the juncture of planned interventions to prevent HIV/AIDS.

The Politics of Tradition and the African Renaissance

The contemporary concern with a pre-colonial past, epitomised in the marketing of Limpopo Province as "Africa's Eden" on the road to Venda, is by no means exclusive to South Africa; it is a truly global phenomenon. The revision of ethnic essentialism to include identity politics (to paraphrase Comaroff and Comaroff [1991: 1]) has taken on a multitude of guises in recent years.⁷ A "growing traditionalism" (Fuller 2003: 153) can be both helped and hindered by the potent forces of the state, and can involve the selective reclamation of older legitimating symbols as hedges against new symbolic orders (*ibid.*:

⁷ For examples see Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994); Clifford (1988; 1997); Bern and Dodds (2000); Tonkinson (1997); Lindstrom and White (1993); Robins (2001).

160). Vast numbers of people in post-apartheid South Africa are actively engaged – apparently independent of state policy – in processes that they consider to be part of a traditional, “tribal” repertoire that is legitimate precisely because it is “of the past”. The question of how far the recognition or imposition of culture by the state leads to a strengthening of traditionalist forces and visions within the local political arena (Oomen 2005: 25) is one with which this thesis is centrally concerned. Connected to this, the socio-political processes whereby the traditional becomes modern, and the way seemingly contradictory processes are experienced as daily life by ordinary people, will be under scrutiny.

Whilst social scientists have felt compelled to deconstruct “tradition” by showing the complex forces that underpin it (cf. Ranger 1983, 1993), the fixity in time and *inflexibility* of tradition is what facilitates its manipulation as a political tool within global, rights based discourse (Oomen 2005; Scorgie 2003). Tradition can appear as “time-present”, encompassing the meanings of “continuing” and a “time-past”, carrying the meanings of previous and “earlier times” (Cohen 1991). These different aspects are not mutually exclusive, and contemporary processes of traditionalism serve to blur any boundaries that may have separated them.

In the South African context, in the apartheid period as well as beyond it, a legally sanctioned politics of tradition has coexisted with a bureaucratic state and planning apparatus. The political and legal construction of tradition – in the guise of rural traditional leadership – resulted from its moulding by colonial forces into a form of “decentralised despotism” in a “bifurcated state” in which African people could be citizens outside of the homelands but remained subjects within them (Mamdani 1996). This represented an attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of the chieftaincy as one of the most reliable gateways to the state. And yet this co-existed with seemingly contradictory policies of “racial modernism” (Bozzoli 2000, 2004) through which “development” interventions were planned and implemented. If we are to engage with the concept of “Afromodernity” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 330), within which the notions of tradition and modernity roam at large on the understanding that they are invoked, intentionally or otherwise, by polysemic “aspirations and intentions”, there needs to be a recognition of the particular way in which such a modernity came to be shaped, in the South African

case, by a contradictory combination of primordial symbols, aspirations to economic growth and state planning.

Key to understanding the continuities and transformations of the politics of tradition in post-apartheid South Africa is the phenomenon known as the "African renaissance". Starting as an essentially intellectual project, it rapidly attracted widespread recognition in South African public life and came to assume an "almost liturgical status" (Lodge 2002: 227). It has influenced ANC policy significantly whilst informing research through newly established and well-funded institutes and academic networks dedicated to constructing a science that will provide "African solutions to African problems". Clearly, it is based on fundamentally essentialist assumptions and aims – epitomised by the notion of *Ubuntu* (an allegedly specific form of "African" humanity towards others), the authenticity of which has exercised various authors (Msimang 2000; Vail and Maseko 2002: 125). I use it as a descriptive, vernacular term with a view to highlighting Venda traditional leaders' strategic alignment with wider ANC policy and the implications of this for the ways in which people understand AIDS.

There are two predominant visions of the African renaissance that have surfaced in public debate. The first is framed in modernist rhetoric and is symbolic of rebirth, in which regeneration will be achieved through liberal democracy, market economics and a revolution in communications technology. In 2001, this assumed a strategic dimension through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and drew significant attention (but limited funding) from the international community. NEPAD is based on market efficiency, good governance and regional co-operation to support international investment, and is closely connected to the wider philosophy of the African Union (AU) of which Thabo Mbeki became the first president in 2002. It strives to create Africa-wide cooperation in trade, currency, aid and diplomacy (Mills 2000: 139-84) and epitomises Mbeki's "modernist" conceptualisation of the African renaissance, which embraces "the economic recovery of the African continent, and... the restructuring of the political agenda in Africa" (Mbeki 2002: 159-160).

The second vision of the African renaissance is that concerning "African heritage". From this perspective, "communities" succeed in "reconstructing themselves around tradition, legacy and heritage, around the values and relationships that characterised pre-colonial

institutions" (Lodge 2002: 230). In this interpretation, there is an explicit call for the re-evaluation of African history and "culture" away from its colonial construction and towards a consolidation of the "wealth of knowledge that Africans are carrying around in their heads" (Dladla 1997 in Vail and Maseko 2002: 128). This rhetoric can be traced back to the African Nationalism of Marcus Garvey, through to Steve Biko and others who have promoted black consciousness. Intellectuals who have taken up this strand of the renaissance tend to be sceptical of the extent to which an increase in global trade will temper the historical disadvantage of the African continent, and call instead for development from within, beginning with a critical examination of consciousness on the basis of which a new African identity may burgeon and flower (cf. Appiah 1992).

This brings us back to the questions raised above about the political uses of tradition. Commentators on the topic have questioned the practicalities and desirability of converting the "African heritage" reading of the renaissance into policy (Ndebele 1997 in Vail and Maseko 2002: 129). They argue that "mythical roots" pale into insignificance in the face of the importance of the provision of public amenities or employment opportunities. They suggest that, ultimately, the "renaissance" concept may represent a barrier to development and an unwelcome return to social classifications based on "race" that have little place in a constitutional democracy for which many people paid with their lives. And yet, as academic debates ponder the commensurability of tradition and policy, often criticising the essentialist underpinnings of the renaissance, in post-apartheid South Africa there is a pronounced engagement on an everyday level with processes that are considered to be part of traditional, "tribal", repertoires: legitimised precisely because they are "of the past".

Examples of this can be seen in attempts to manage sexuality and curb the exceptionally high rates of HIV transmission among young people. Thus, a "revival" in the practice of pre-marital virginity testing of girls in KwaZulu-Natal is justified by ritual experts explicitly in terms of the epidemic (Leclerc Madlala 2001, 2005; Scorgie 2002). Likewise, the re-introduction of *Umkhosi Womhlanga* (the reed ceremony) by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini in 1991 was deemed necessary in terms of preventing HIV transmission by encouraging young girls to delay sexual debut until marriage. Leaving aside the questionable ethics of such phenomena, they demonstrate that protagonists of Zulu tradition have seemingly appropriated an idea of the past with which they seek to shape

the present. Connections between the state and local politics are central to these processes, although the people engaged in them may perceive their actions to be relatively independent of state influence.

In Venda, this has taken on quite different dynamics. Although traditional leaders have clearly made efforts to promote “tradition” in the region, stating frequently that female initiation ceremonies, with their famed musical performances such as the *Domba*, incorporate AIDS education, their recourse to tradition – as we shall see – must be read on several levels of intentionality. It also has differential effects, depending upon the context, the categories of people who attempt to reinforce tradition and who are intended to receive it, and the modes of expression used to convey the various messages. In its widest context, the pragmatic implications of the African renaissance in Venda throw light on the relationship between knowledge and experience, both in and outside of the ritual context.

The Politics of Knowledge

Tradition, understood as a bounded set of practices, is legitimated by knowledge. In court cases over official recognition and in claims to land or other legal rights, such a body of knowledge can be boiled down into the essential(ist) criteria that lend authenticity to particular groups or practices. And yet tradition is never a mere receptacle of invariant knowledge. Rather, it is made up of fundamentally creative and interpretive acts on the part of the carriers of tradition which are intended to make it appear invariant, ancient and primordial (Simpson 2002; cf. Fuller 1997). This is also the case in non-legal settings. “Revivals”, such as that of virginity testing and female initiation, hinge on the collective, selective, and creative memory of distinct social groups whose recourse to specific knowledge ascribes them a new found social status, often as “ritual leaders”. Where such leaders make use of musical performance, the appearance of invariance and unchangeability may be particularly pronounced: Blacking remarked that musical symbols are especially resistant to change and that music “can only confirm sentiments that exist but cannot create new ones” (1964: 108, 334). In the current environment, oriented towards a seemingly global rights based discourse, evidence of legitimate knowledge serves to authorise access to formal and informal practices of tradition.

A central concern of this thesis is the relationship between ritual knowledge and experience, and the link which these have, in turn, to the knowledge/experience nexus which exists beyond the ritual context, particularly that concerned with planned HIV/AIDS interventions. Anthropological approaches to ritual knowledge taken by Barth (1975, 1990, 2002) and Lambek (1993) are pertinent to this area of analysis. Relevant debates here concern the uneven social distribution of ritual knowledge, its transfer between discrete and hierarchical social groups in a controlled ritual environment, and the extent to which these "traditions" or "corporuses" of knowledge are bounded or fluid.

Knowledge, based on experience, is that which constitutes "what a person employs to interpret and act on the world" (Barth 2002: 1). A person's stock of knowledge structures that person's understanding and purposive ways of coping with his lived environment. Barth's analysis is concerned primarily with the transfer of ritual knowledge in the seven complex stages of male initiations among the Baktaman of Papua New Guinea and in sacred temples presided over by priests of Bali Hinduism. Knowledge, he proffers, is consistently characterised by "three faces". These appear together simultaneously in every performance and transaction of knowing, and allow him to build a model for the comparative analysis of different knowledge traditions and to account for "marginal change" within them. The first of these "faces" is a body of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world: a "corpus" of knowledge. The second is a characteristic set of media through which it is instantiated and communicated, and the last is the social organisation within which this takes place (2002: 3 cf. 1975). In different traditions of knowledge and over time in a single tradition, these three faces interconnect in various ways.

For example, Baktaman initiation is centred on secret rituals that deal with growth, fertility and ancestral support. The validity of this knowledge is dependent upon its having been received from the ancestors under constraints of secrecy (1975: 217). The secret initiation of young men thus provides the validating organisational format for the reproduction and transmission of ritual knowledge. This process of initiation, through which men are restricted to certain responsibilities and prohibited from others, can take an entire lifetime. In this way the gradual release of ritual knowledge impinges on social organisation. Barth compares the different stages of initiation to the image of Chinese

boxes: constructed with multiple levels, with each organised to obscure the content of the next. The communicative medium that embodies and transmits this knowledge depends upon a combination of secrecy and danger for its heightened experiential capacity and efficacy, and the corpus of assertions that draw analogies with the natural and social world, are at once intended as mystification and revelation. Although, as secrets of the ancestors, this corpus should theoretically be unchanging (cf. La Fontaine 1985), Barth identifies regional and historical processes of "marginal change" through the inconsistent pragmatics of performance and the variable memory of ritual leaders.

Interdependent traditions of knowledge and their uneven social distribution are also of central concern in Lambek's analysis of ritual knowledge in Mayotte, near Madagascar. In comparison to Barth, however, Lambek is explicit that:

[T]hings in Mayotte do not fully tie together...there is not a hidden order beneath the surface just waiting for the foreign anthropologist with his or her sophisticated intellectual technology to be mined...[rather] there are a plurality of unities, lying always just ahead (1993: 379).

Following Schutz (1964), his analysis is based on the distinction between the "expert", the "well-informed citizen" and the "man on the street" (1993: 69). The expert's knowledge is limited to a specific field, but therein it is clear and distinct. The man on the street has a working knowledge of many fields (or "branches" in Barth's terms) through which he can react to typical situations to achieve typical results. Well informed citizens fall in between these two categories in the amount of knowledge they seek, and they assist in its legitimization through periodic critical evaluation. The three most salient fields of knowledge ("traditions" in Barth's terms) in Mayotte are Islamic textual knowledge, the cosmology of sorcery and spirit possession. At any given time, an individual can fall into all three categories in relation to different fields. An expert in possession can be a man on the street in textual knowledge and vice-versa. Lambek is thus concerned not only with the relative quantity of peoples' knowledge, but "the reasons they are acquiring it and their relationship to it" (1993: 69). Experts maintain levels of professionalism and attempt to secure legitimacy through the practice of secrecy. This is evidenced by a healer who, in the process of teaching a student, voices his concern that "If it [the knowledge]

becomes public, then people will not be able to become well" (1993: 296). The success of the cure is predicated on the restricted nature of the knowledge.⁸

The gradual release of secret knowledge (the corpus) by a powerful and spiritually sanctioned group (the experts) through processes of initiation (the communicative medium) to those who are in various states of liminality is, of course, familiar anthropological territory (cf. for example, Turner 1969a, La Fontaine 1985, Comaroff 1985, Bloch 1992). What, then, do Barth and Lambek's contributions add to the anthropological understanding of knowledge transfer and its opposite, secrecy? Firstly, both authors stress that the acquiring/accumulation of ritual knowledge is based, fundamentally, on experience. For Barth this is the experience of long-term initiation and the revelation of ancestral knowledge. For Lambek, it is either the experience of reading and learning the Islamic texts or the embodied experience of becoming possessed. Secondly, for this knowledge to be transferred, conditions of secrecy must be ensured. Its value comes from the fact that it is not readily available in the public domain and thus "experts" are charged with the responsibility of maintaining the corpus and securing the appropriate conditions for its reproduction and by extension, the regeneration of complete individuals. Thirdly, both Lambek and Barth emphasise the inherent danger of knowledge, and the protective space offered by a ritual environment for its safe and complete transferral. In Mayotte "it is bad to know too much...people with knowledge are both respected and suspected" (Lambek 1993: 7).

The combination of their accounts, with an emphasis on secrecy, danger and experience, is useful for my purposes because it allows me to theorise the connections between ritual knowledge and common-sense, and to understand how biomedical knowledge is perceived as a ritual corpus outside the ritual context.

⁸ Lambek makes a distinction between objectified and embodied knowledge, both of which exist in dialectic relation to each other in each of the disciplines. Islamic knowledge is primarily objectified in the text, but in the process and performance of learning is embodied through prayer and proverbs. Possession knowledge is primarily embodied through the practice of knowing how to become possessed, but ultimately objectified through the coding and observance of strict taboos that characterise the embodied experience.

The Knowledge Politics of Planned AIDS Intervention

Manifesting a very different understanding of the relationship between knowledge and experience, health policies reveal the conviction that a deliberate change in the former will alter the latter. The process whereby planned interventions are designed to change behaviour through education is neatly conceptualised with the acronym KAP: "Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice". The extent to which this is ineffectual, due to economic, social and "cultural" factors, has been theorised as the "KAP gap". (cf. Matthews *et al.* 1995) Whilst it is thus widely acknowledged that KAP approaches are inadequate, the reasons for their failure are not well understood; yet they remain popular in health intervention models (cf. Turner and Sheppard 1999; Campbell 2003).

Based on the premise of knowledge transfer, KAP can be conceptualised fundamentally as the attempt to draw together separate "traditions" or corpuses of knowledge. Instead of thinking of knowledge transfer from experts to novices in a controlled ritual environment, this points the way to the distribution of knowledge through public programmes such as peer group education. In AIDS interventions, the biomedical tradition is clearly the most powerful in terms of international support and access to resources, but as we shall see through the agency of the actors involved, local understandings can and do usurp this in a variety of ways. Long has termed these contestations "battlefields of knowledge" (Long 1992; Cernea 1992; 1995).⁹ This is not dissimilar to Lambek's understanding of coexisting fields of knowledge, although anthropological approaches have been slow to engage with the development literature on this topic.

Concepts of intervention have changed over time. The dominant theoretical paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s offered a mechanical model of the relationship between policy, implementation and outcomes that relied on a linear progression from policy formulation, through outcomes, to evaluation (Long 2001: 31). This has been widely criticised on several grounds, and contemporary approaches are more likely to factor in the

⁹ Cernea identifies two categories; knowledge for understanding and knowledge for action (1995: 343). The two categories are distinct, but have a symbiotic relationship. Knowledge for action is valid, according to Cernea, only if it increases knowledge for understanding, whilst knowledge for understanding on its own can be "pedestrian and deceptive". (*ibid.*)

transformation and “evaluation” of policy during implementation and the “external” influence of factors such as “culture”. In the development of HIV/AIDS interventions, this has led to the promotion of “finding ways of negotiating social hierarchies, or [culturally appropriate] methods of communicating creatively” (Healthlink 2007: 6). Although interventions remain mostly diagnostic and prescriptive, the linear model has been largely replaced by “actor-centred” approaches that seek to construct analysis from the “bottom up” as opposed to the previously dominant “top down” approach; that is, to:

[U]nderstand the processes by which interventions enter the lifeworlds of the individuals and groups affected and thus come to form part of the resources and constraints of the social strategies they develop...the concept of intervention [is] an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated progress, not simply the execution of an already-specified plan of action with expected outcomes (Long 2001: 31).

Commentators have however argued that actor-centred approaches overemphasise individual behaviour. It is far more likely that AIDS intervention projects fail, they argue, because of social factors (poverty, patriarchy etc.) and “cultural” understandings that impinge upon people’s abilities to change behaviour.¹⁰ Writers such as McDonald (1996) and Campbell (2002, 2003) thus claim that the failure to alter sexual behaviour concerns a lack of sensitivity to local cultural norms as well as socio-economic circumstances (lacking in “social capital”) that might make such behaviour change impossible. For example, highlighting the role of “cultural attitudes to fertility”, McDonald (1996: 1325) has shown the ways in which condoms impinge on the desire for a large family in Botswana (cf. Heald 2006). But such studies have inevitably raised more questions than they have answered, providing cursory and often utilitarian explanations as to why interventions don’t work and avoiding the issue of how they might be more successful in achieving their objectives.

Such studies, by de-emphasising the strategies and intentions of actors and stressing the intractability of “culture”, also run the risk of ignoring how individuals may contest and transform meanings. The female HIV/AIDS peer group educators in Venda, as mostly young, unmarried and unemployed women, embrace their new-found “identity” as quasi-

¹⁰ See Packard and Epstein (1991), Parker (1996), Campbell and Williams (1998, 1999), Barnett and Whiteside (2002), Delius and Walker (2002), and Kapeleni *et al.* (2004). See Waterston (1997) for an example of this kind of critique based on ethnographic research among homeless women in New York City, USA.

social workers and, ultimately, aim for employment in the governmental health sector. In part, this identity is predicated upon their promotion of biomedical understandings of the virus. Music, some of it sanctioned by "tradition", is fundamental to these educators' enterprise, but they use it to sing about new things: things they "cannot talk about". Sanctioned by international funding agencies, peer educators' account of AIDS is centred on the promotion of prevention and treatment. Their approach thus represents a complex hybrid in which pre-existing culture intersects with international development discourse.

If anthropologists have been slow to consider the knowledge politics of AIDS intervention, they have not ignored it completely. A small but relevant body of research, situated at the interface of anthropology and development, has initiated the task of making connections between the biomedical model of AIDS and illness representations in "folk models" or, as they are also known in the inevitable development jargon, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Foremost in this vein have been Green (1994), Liddle *et al.* (2005), De Bruyn (1992), Heald (1995; 2006), Ingstad (1990) Leclerc-Madlala (2002) and McDonald and Schatz (2006). These analysts have made important connections between the centrality of (certain) women, (menstrual) blood and (inappropriate) sex in 'IKS'. They demonstrate that high levels of cross-over between the arenas of bio-medical and indigenous knowledge have occurred since AIDS education projects began to be pursued in earnest.

The precise nature of this "marginal change" (Barth 2002) in a corpus of knowledge is difficult but not, as we see in Chapter 5, impossible to map out. These authors have made significant headway in helping us understand the interdependency and commensurability of biomedical science and IKS in the context of the AIDS pandemic. This thesis draws on their ideas, but develops an argument based on the ways in which folk models are rooted, essentially, in contemporary political processes. By interpreting the commensurability of the folk and biomedical corpuses through the knowledge/experience paradigm, it is possible to see biomedicine – as it is often understood in Venda – as a form of ritual knowledge. This has profound implications for the processes of knowledge transfer that have been widely adopted by policy planners who design AIDS interventions.

Despite this partial engagement with development studies, and with a few notable exceptions, it has been claimed that "nowhere is the failure of anthropologists to engage

with the real world of suffering...more evident than in their absence from debate and action around the HIV/AIDS epidemic" (Barnett 2004: 1). Some may feel this criticism to be unwarranted, given the contribution of anthropologists to several "special editions" of journals such as *African Studies*, the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, and *Social Science and Medicine*. These reflect the many conferences and symposia that have attempted to enable the cross-fertilisation of research ideas and agendas on the topic, in line with a conviction that understanding and addressing AIDS demands a multi-disciplinary approach. A glance at the contributors to the recently established *African Journal for AIDS Research* indicates that social scientists are rising to this challenge, and that multi-disciplinary approaches are beginning to bear fruit. Nonetheless, as Barnett suggested, anthropology remains under-represented, and the use of its methods scarce.

There are important reasons for this. It would take a particularly controversial version of participant observation to ascertain the precise nature in which people conduct sexual relations. As a methodology, anthropology may be ideally suited to harness at least some of the nuance required for an analysis of HIV/AIDS, but the transmission of HIV is not easy to research; sex happens between the sheets (or in the bushes) and people generally do not want to talk about it or, for that matter, about AIDS. It is rather the case, then, that some aspects of AIDS are more conducive to ethnographic study than others. Factors that can be seen as relevant in an epidemiological study – such as "poverty", "gender" or "culture" – have been analysed, and then used in the construction of general models that attempt to demonstrate how far these are causative in patterns of transmission. Such an approach allows the researcher, using tools such as interviews, focus groups and surveys, to mine for patterns of social behaviour which seem pertinent. Whist this may produce some forms of "knowledge for understanding", such approaches are inadequate in assessing the complexities of social life. They are thus also ultimately unuseful in yielding "knowledge for action".

AIDS-related behaviour, then, is difficult to investigate. Equally difficult to probe are the complex interdependencies of knowledge and experience which accompany such behaviour and which often appear to prevent its alteration. Despite the secretiveness connected to issues of sex and sexuality, and the apparent intractability of culture-bound behaviour, different means can be found by which to conduct research in this arena. Of particular value in my study has been musical performance. While ethnomusicologists

such as Blacking held the view that music is securely positioned within specific social contexts and that it serves to delineate fixed life-cycle stages and gender positions, they have also acknowledged that music can also enable the transcendence of social positionings. The relationship between music, ritual, and their social contexts thus encompasses both conservatism and flexible change.

I outline below the ways in which my fieldwork was conducted.

Researching Ritual, Music, Politics and Peer Education

I have an association with the Venda region of 15 years standing. The character of my involvement in Venda ritual, music, politics and peer education is what dictated not only the subject of my research, but also its methods. Understanding the ways in which I gathered my data, my relationships with the main characters in the chapters that follow, and my status as a particular kind of insider/outsider, requires some knowledge of this association.

My first visit, in 1994, was as a gap-year volunteer English teacher for an organisation known as the Project Trust. Realising that as a 17-year-old unmarried and childless youth it would be difficult to gain the respect of the adults I had been charged with teaching, I embarked on a joint English-teaching and Tshivenda-learning strategy: this proved a successful means of integrating myself as well as starting me on the slow process of getting to know the language. During my visit, I met and was befriended by Harold Lemke, an American Buddhist monk who had become a self-styled AIDS educator after nursing a friend who had died of an AIDS-related illness. I became involved in several of his projects, doing condom distribution and addressing village councils at weekends. Harold later established an NGO called the Centre for Positive Care (CPC): an organisation with which I continued to be involved, but in a manner which combined activism with academic enquiry. Alongside my role in establishing projects and recruiting volunteers, I also conducted short spells of research with CPC volunteers for my undergraduate dissertation at Glasgow University. In sum, my analysis of the CPC and its peer education projects in chapter 4 derives from a long trajectory of acquaintance, involvement and observation.

I also became the lead guitarist in a popular local reggae band. As a reggae musician, involvement in the performance culture of this society so famous for its music, and participating in the songwriting and recording of this particular group, was a matter of intuition rather than strategy. After several years the band became more successful and popular. Like many musicians in South Africa, they are guaranteed at least 12 fully funded sell-out concerts every year as they are enlisted to perform at government sponsored celebrations on public holidays. I have been party to the band's rise to success and relative wealth in this short space of time, co-writing and producing two albums (for which we received regional musical awards) and performing live on a regular basis not only in Limpopo but in the Venda quarters of Soweto (*Tshiwelo* – place of rest). Through this I have become something of a minor celebrity in the Venda region.

Given my status as a foreigner with particular kinds of insider connections, it was no easy matter to convince people upon my return in 2004 that I was now a bona fide anthropological researcher. The memory of John Blacking, looming large in Venda and giving people a clear model of what an anthropologist should be, made matters worse. Given that the band's success had increased exponentially, it was increasingly difficult to maintain a background presence. I was identified primarily as a Rasta/reggae musician rather than as an academic.

This perception occasionally impinged directly upon my research agenda. Although I gained access to several female initiation schools through the mediation of King Tshivhase, I failed to secure entry to their Christian equivalents. Never explicitly stated, a main reason for this was that, with my dreadlocks and adherence to Rastafarian ideology, I breached the fundamental requirements of ritual purity. Although many Christian friends who attended these churches and ceremonies understood my predicament, and although I thus gleaned much secondary data from them, they were ultimately unwilling to introduce me to their church communities through which I could have attempted to negotiate access.

My identity as a popular reggae musician did, however, have an advantageous dimension. It made my presence in male-dominated spaces such as beer halls and late night music venues in Venda and Johannesburg safe, even pleasurable, and acted as a

catalyst for amenable relationships with many groups of men from various backgrounds. Indeed, the *Tshilombe* musician Solomon Mathase, whose song I analyse in Chapter 5, initially permitted my recording of his performances on the condition that I share it with other producers in the music industry and promote his talents with a view to securing a record contract. I attempted to keep my side of the deal, but we have as yet been unable to find a willing record label.

As an avid guitarist, I not only recorded the songs of Solomon and his peers, but also learned to play and sing them. Musical repetition and innovation became a research tool through which I familiarised myself with the stylistic tendencies and the lyrical composition of *Zwilombe* guitar songs. Venda *Zwilombe* musicians' distinctive style of re-stringing and re-tuning the six string guitar facilitates lengthy performances of songs which correspond to "three chord tricks" (I have included a digital recording of Solomon's solo performance of *Zwidzumbe* as the last track on the attached CD with a full translation as an appendix). The marriage of my folk guitar finger-picking style with Solomon's distinct sound over the "three chord tricks" proved to be popular among beer hall dancers. This brought me closer to Solomon and his group of friends, and facilitated my investigation – through the lyrical content of the songs we were singing together – of their attitudes towards sexual illness, traditional medicine and sexual encounters, in a way that standard interview techniques, even if supplemented by participant observation, might not have done.

It was partly through my reputation as a popular musician that I became acquainted with King Tshivhase, but my association with the king was immeasurably strengthened through my friendship with a trusted royal advisor, Mr. Traugatt Fobbe. Mr Fobbe's father, a Lutheran missionary in Venda in the 1940s who had had a close working relationship with the current king's father,¹¹ was expelled from South Africa by the apartheid authorities under suspicion of involvement in "terrorist activity". When the son, Traugatt, returned to Venda in 1993 to establish a tourist business, King Tshivhase honoured his father's memory by developing a close relationship with him. Mr. Fobbe hosted the king and me at his house on several occasions in order that I might explain the objectives of my research and lobby his support.

¹¹ See Kirkaldy (2006) for a detailed analysis of the Berlin Mission Society in Venda from 1870-1900.

My relationship with King Tshivhase presented a common ethical conundrum, typical of situations in which researcher and informant attempt to manipulate each other while concealing their true motives. An early example of this was his insistence that I live at Mukombani (see Map 3), the Tshivhase royal headquarters, and that he appoint several relatives who had studied anthropology at the University of Venda as my team of research assistants. He suggested that this would enable him to “support” my project in a similar way to that in which he had accommodated a researcher from the University of Pretoria the previous year. Reluctant to expose my project to this level of control from a member of one of the most influential and pervasive traditional authorities in the post-apartheid era, I suggested an alternative.

By pointing out that there were no HIV/AIDS peer group education projects in Mukombani, I convinced him that the village of Fondwe, situated close to several projects while not being completely beyond royal control, would be the right base for my research. I arranged to reside in the homestead of Mr. Zwiakonda Rathogwa, the *khotsi munenne* (younger brother to the chief) at Fondwe and secretary to the traditional council (*khoro*). He proved to be a perfect host. He tacitly understood my ploy to distance myself from Tshivhase, and also recognized that I had chosen his homestead partly because of its inaccessible nature, at the end of a poorly maintained road that required a four wheel drive vehicle for access. In the midst of my multiple involvements in Venda political and musical life, this relative remoteness gave me some respite from my entanglements.

We agreed that I would live rent free on the premises for two years, building a hut which I would leave to be used as Rathogwa’s *pfamo* (personal sleeping hut) or to be handed over to one of his three sons on the condition that I be accommodated in it on return visits. The siting and design of the hut had important symbolic value: it was built on the foundation of the previous *Tshivhambo* (a hut used for conducting royal business or female initiation; from *u vhamba* – to stretch, or to elongate like skin over a drum).¹² The symbolism of the skin is incorporated into several female initiation rites, in which the initiates are “hung” upside down from a pole behind their knees and attached to the *Tshivhambo* door, to “stretch” the body. The design of the poles (*matanda*) on the inside of the roof is also specific to *milayo* (rules) of initiation through which girls are “taught”

¹² *U Vhamba* is also used to translate “crucify”.

ritual knowledge (Chapter 3). In the process of building and living in the hut, I thus found myself learning about the hidden world of female initiation, into which I would eventually immerse myself in search of an understanding of the parallel workings of AIDS education.

From the vantage point of Fondwe village I was well placed to access the HIV/AIDS peer education projects that I had helped to establish, and that I had now secured funding to investigate. To help me assess the social dynamics of the projects, I employed as my research assistant Mr. Colbert Mushaisano Tshivhase, whom I had first met in 1999 at the University of Venda. With Colbert, as in the broader Venda setting, I found myself in an insider/outsider relationship. As a person with some – albeit an incomplete – academic training, he had interests in common with my own, but there were limits to this commonality in two important respects. Firstly, Colbert is in line to the Tshivhase throne, and often attempted to influence my interpretation of events and data in line with royal dogma which, to his disgruntlement, I initially rejected. As time progressed, however, I began to see the benefits of such an insight, so long as I recorded and used it in a highly contextualised manner. In this way, my fieldwork notes of events such as the installation of headmen (*Vhuhosi* – chapter 2) cover my general observations alongside Colbert's interpretation of them as a royal insider. The same applies for my notes on the public sessions of female initiation, although as we see in Chapter 3 I attended the "secret" sessions in the *Tshivhambo* alone.

The second reason for our occasional disagreement was his disapproval of my "music friends". I spent a lot of time recording, performing, and relaxing with the band and its entourage, but Colbert was never welcomed by them. In attempting to resolve the resulting tension, I learnt much about the convoluted politics of Venda. The members of the band are all of Mukwevho lineage, a proud group of Ngona ("original" inhabitants of the area) that trace their history to pre-Singo conquest (see Chapter 2). They regarded the (Singo) Tshivhase house as arrogant and authoritarian. The lead singer of the band made a statement to this effect at an award ceremony when, upon receiving an award for the promotion of the Tshivenda language from King Tshivhase, he refused to remove his hat. When asked explicitly to do so, he refused, replying "*misanda ha pfuki milambo*" – "chiefs don't cross rivers" (insinuating that this was not Tshivhase country). Colbert found this offensive and consistently encouraged me to spend less time with them. It became clear to me early on that the status of insider/outsider was not exclusively mine. Colbert

was, by virtue of his royal blood, excluded from "commoner" cohorts; the band members, by virtue of their commoner identity and their celebrity Rasta status, excluded themselves from royal, and other, groups. This distinction between royal and common, of which I provide a detailed account in the following chapter, is fundamental to Venda sociality.

My split loyalties in these spheres of interaction allowed me some "balance" in my data collection and analysis. Achieving balance in respect of my interactions with peer educators posed different challenges. While some of the older educators, who have known me for more than a decade, treat me more like a schoolboy than like a musician or an anthropologist, some of the younger ones – given my ongoing role in assessing the fluctuating demographic and economic composition of the projects through questionnaires, focus groups, in-depth and open-ended interviews – identified me as working "for the office". Occasionally this acted to my disadvantage, in that it made people reluctant to talk honestly, but it also aided my research by enabling confessions of grievances in the hope that I would act in educators' interests – which I often did. Upon analysis of my interview transcripts I detected both influences at play, but in the end it is difficult to establish the extent to which either of these influenced my data.

I spent a lot of time with peer educators both in and out of their working environment. This involved attending funerals, weddings, and other ceremonies at weekends, at preparation meetings during the week, and at their training sessions and public performances. I became very close to many of them, and through this I gained the confidence to employ a more experimental methodology. I distributed diaries and asked them to make regular entries documenting their daily activities and work related information (cf. Blacking 1964 in Venda, Jones 1993 in Cape Town) as well as village gossip, rumour and scandal, not only specifically related to AIDS, but concerning general issues such as sexual networks, government mass media campaigns, witchcraft allegations, intra- and inter-village political rivalries and the recent influx of illegal immigrants to the Venda region from Zimbabwe. They were asked not to reveal anything through which I could identify them personally, and I taught them how to use pseudonyms to conceal the identity of those they were writing about. This was, in general, a very successful approach which yielded considerable amounts of qualitative data.

Allowing me yet further access to relatively invisible realms of experience was the music these educators used. My focus on peer education songs in Chapter 5 was based initially on the observation that they spent most of their work-time composing, practising or performing musical renditions at public performances. My interest in this was compounded by the frequent claim that they "sing about what they cannot talk about", and as early as 1999 I had embarked on a project to document peer education songs. In a similar way to my approach with Solomon Mathase, I employed my own musical ability as a research tool with peer educators. Many of the songs that I recorded, some of which are analysed in chapter 5 and appear on the attached CD, were thus taught to me by the educators. The act of recording and listening back to the melodic patterns, harmonic structures and lyrical content of the songs proved invaluable to my own learning. Again, through familiarisation with the lyrics, embodiment of the dance routines and performance at practice sessions as part of their ensemble, I developed an awareness of, even an affinity with, the content that facilitated a comprehensive process of content analysis.

The experiential aspects of utilising music as a research tool furnished me with comfortable spaces in which to inquire about the less-than-obvious meanings of a song – "if you are going to perform it with us", Mme a Mapule claimed, "then you must *feel* it like us!" The process of learning and performing music undoubtedly reduced the social distance between researcher and researched in that I became the socially recognised *learner*. In this way I attempted to negate my identity as a popular musician in the process of learning about the songs, and the lives, of the peer educators.

My focus on music and the use of music as a research tool to some extent provided me with a means to uncover hidden realms of knowledge and experience; the distribution of diaries augmented this. My observation of NGO volunteers followed on from my role in helping to recruit them and in monitoring them over a decade. My connections with royalty provided opportunities for investigation as well as demonstrating to me the intrinsically hierarchical and patrimonial character of Venda society. My overall methodological approach to fieldwork certainly falls into the category of participant observation – I spent much time just sitting, talking, driving, eating, and gossiping with whoever happened to be around, and interacting with people in these informal ways provided much of the substance of what follows. But the particular character of my involvements in Venda

society, having shaped the subjects of my enquiry, also yielded the means of investigation, in a manner that took me beyond observation and into participation.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis, as mentioned earlier, is concerned with the ways in which post-apartheid traditionalism, under the guidance of chiefly politics, intersects with the anthropology of knowledge at the juncture of planned interventions to prevent HIV/AIDS. I develop an argument that starts at the national level of policy formation and ends with the micro-analysis of rumour and gossip. The chapters in between are designed to demonstrate the connections between these two stages.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the transition from apartheid to democracy and situates the study in an historical account of the political economy of traditional leadership. Specifically, it looks at the political origins of an official promotion of "culture" and "tradition", set against the broader backdrop of the so-called African renaissance. Such a promotion of policy is explained as resulting from contestations over traditional leadership in the former homelands of South Africa, of which Venda was one. In such a setting, Venda's King Kennedy Tshivhase emerged into the post-apartheid era with an accumulation of moral capital based on the struggle credentials of his recent forebears. I consider the implications of a decision taken at the national level of government to recognise one "paramount king" (*Khosikhulu*) in each of the areas with a history of traditional leadership. This has given rise to a bitter succession struggle between the royal houses of Mphephu and Tshivhase that has re-ignited historically salient rivalries between the two. Notions of an African renaissance have become central to Tshivhase's strategy for the consolidation of power, and it is this that has prompted the official promotion of tradition within his borders.

Chapter 3 develops the analysis of this succession struggle by focusing on the specific dynamics that have developed through Tshivhase's practice of, and discourse about, the African renaissance. In this vein, it provides an account of *Vhusha*: a Venda girls' initiation school that, according to King Tshivhase, has incorporated elements of AIDS education into the ritual process. Based on an analysis of the relationship between

hierarchy, ritual knowledge and experience, the chapter sets out the problematic nature of such a claim, and points back to the ways in which esoteric knowledge has been bolstered significantly by the chiefly promotion of tradition. It thus introduces the “folk model” of sexual health (*malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi* – the illnesses of women) and serves to illustrate an important mechanism for the transmission of this corpus of ritual knowledge.

Having established the difficulties of successfully incorporating a biomedical model of AIDS education into female initiation schools, Chapter 4 then considers more conventional approaches to the topic. It summarises the ambiguities of the South African government’s response to the epidemic, and the relationship between the state and NGOs in this regard. The chapter accounts for the rise of the Centre for Positive Care (CPC), the only NGO in the former homeland devoted solely to the facilitation of “participatory” AIDS education, and provides an analysis of activities carried out by the exclusively female peer educators in the implementation of intervention projects. Central to this is a consideration of how, and how far, participation in peer educator schemes acts as a vehicle for upward social mobility. Assumptions about the character of empowerment inherent in the “participatory” model are thus shown to be largely unfounded.

Through a closer examination of peer educators’ performances, Chapter 5 then explores the complex identity that is constructed by them when they draw on various musical genres – whether these emanate from “Venda tradition”, church, or the struggle. An alternative, male, musical interpretation of HIV/AIDS is presented through the songs and reflexive accounts of Solomon Mathase. Comparing the two genres facilitates a detailed discussion of the “folk model” of sexual illness, in which it is argued that the biomedical model promoted by peer education has to some extent been reappropriated within conservative, patriarchal aetiology. This argument demands a closer look at the relationship, introduced in Chapters 1 and 3, between knowledge and experience. Through their knowledge of biomedical devices such as the contraceptive pill and abortion, whereby fertility is thought to be inhibited and pollution created, the educators are assumed by many men and older women to have first-hand experience of these. The chapter demonstrates that these educators – alongside other women who have an alleged disrespect for patriarchal authority – have been constructed as carriers of the virus. By tracing the origins of this “folk model” back to the ritual knowledge and

hierarchies of female initiation, it is argued that the current predominance of explanations that frame AIDS in terms of bad blood, pollution and threats to fertility should be understood in the context of the wider political economy of traditional leadership and the current promotion of tradition.

This will involve a discussion of the gendered dynamics of female vulnerability, and the ways in which this is connected to wider patriarchal relations in the region. Chapter 5 demonstrates the structurally and culturally subordinate position of women and the impact of this on controlling decisions over sexual behaviour (cf. Unlin 1992; Hunter 2002; Baylies 2000; Bujra and Baylies 2000). It shows that whilst Eurocentric categories such as "prostitute" or "promiscuous" have been widely hailed as inadequate in the academic African AIDS lexicon (Craddock 2000; Kalipeni 2000; Oppong 1998; Preston-Whyte 2003; Wojcicki 2002; Tawfik and Watkins 2007; Gottemoeller 2000), such terms have counterparts in African languages, and they are central to a gendered understanding of AIDS.

Chapter 6 then provides a final ethnographic layer to the thesis and continues the concern with the politics of knowledge and its relationship to experience in the context of social stigma. It widens the ethnographic gaze to frame AIDS not just as a sexual illness associated with promiscuity (cf. Posel 2005; Mbali 2004) but as a source of unnatural death (cf. Niehaus 2007; McNeill 2007a). It draws on a small but significant body of literature that has highlighted the centrality of witchcraft to the ways in which HIV/AIDS is experienced in southern Africa. Whilst Farmer (2006 [1992]) was *the* pioneer in this field, making connections between sorcery accusations and AIDS in Haiti, Ashforth (2000, 2004, 2005) has taken up this mantle in South Africa, describing the distinct symbolic resonance between AIDS and witchcraft beliefs in Soweto.

By analysing reactions to a spate of alleged poisonings, I criticize the dominant position taken in the literature that the reason people do not speak about AIDS is because they "deny" its existence. On the contrary, Chapter 6 demonstrates that "public silence" is maintained as a means of constructing and maintaining what I call "degrees of separation" between an individual and the unnatural cause of another's death. By conducting public performances on a weekly basis, peer educators systematically breach this public silence and thus associate themselves intimately with AIDS as a cause of

death. Their knowledge of it presupposes an experience of it and they are found guilty through association; caught in the web that connects knowledge with experience. When taken in combination with the argument made in Chapter 5, this provides a compelling account of the extent to which peer educators are said to be vectors of the virus. Their central object and symbol of prevention, the condom, is by extension associated with causing AIDS rather than preventing it.

This thesis thus considers AIDS from several different angles whilst tracing a picture of connections between national and local political processes in the formation of popular responses to AIDS. Importantly, whilst acknowledging its importance, I do *not* situate the thesis in the context of the well documented and highly controversial government response as recent accounts have sought to do (cf. Fassin 2007). Seeking for culpability beyond cultural factors, writers have pinned blame – in South Africa, in particular – on the government’s “denialist” position (see Chapter 4). Clearly, the official response to AIDS in South Africa has been “the most resounding failure of Thabo Mbeki’s government” (Fassin 2007: xvii) and it is important to recognise this. However there is a desperate need for new approaches to AIDS in southern Africa, through which fresh insights can offer new explanations for the things which the well-established and oft-reproduced approaches have failed to account for. I want to demonstrate in this thesis that there are other, potentially more fruitful, ways of analysing responses to the epidemic that need not resort to a continual reiteration of Mbeki’s well known flaws.

By situating my analysis in the political economy of traditional leadership, and highlighting the connections between this and the ways in which AIDS interventions are experienced, the current study demonstrates one way of going about this. In this way, I will demonstrate that the challenge to frame an effective response to AIDS must be seen in the context of alternative understandings of sexual illness: they emanate as much “from below” as they do “from above”. It is the analysis of interstitial processes, in which the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and experience is fundamental, that I try to reach a more composite understanding of the ways in which AIDS has been variously interpreted in a rural South African context.

CHAPTER 2

Apartheid, Democracy and the Political Economy of Venda Traditional Leadership

The road that leads up to the Tshivhase royal kraal in the Mukombani mountains was already crammed as I forced my pick-up truck – laden with the local reggae band and our gear – through the dense sea of people. We were en route to perform at a ceremony organized in honour of the late King Frans Mphaya Ratsimphi Tshivhase (grandfather to the current king) who had been posthumously awarded the prestigious ANC Luthuli award for a “meaningful contribution in the fight against injustice and apartheid”. Many in the excited crowd had come in the hope that the widely publicised event would feature an address by ex-president Nelson Mandela, and a rumour was spreading that he had arrived hours ago with an army escort. As we inched into the packed fore-court, our entrance was announced over the loudspeaker and there was a brief roar of approval. The ground was at capacity, additional people had found perches in trees or on top of the huge grey rocks that surround and fortify the red soil and lush green forest that has hidden the mountain fortress at Mukombani from invaders for over two centuries. A large stage, draped in white shade-cloth and the ANC colours of black, green and gold, had been specially erected and was protected by a troupe of huge men yielding sub-machine guns. The numerous dignitaries, who did not include Mandela, were arranged in three tiers on the stage with the most senior cabinet ministers and ANC elders towards the front. In the middle, an empty space had been reserved in anticipation of the imminent arrival of the current Khosi, Kennedy Midiyavhathu Tshivhase, who was to receive the award on behalf of his grandfather.

As our manager negotiated a performance schedule with the live radio production team, I fought through the crowd to get a programme for the day's events. On the back, an obituary told of how “comrade” Ratsimphi Tshivhase had ruled fearlessly from Mukombani during the 1930s and 40s. He was prominent and influential in early struggle movements, and had nurtured an open allegiance with the Communist Party. His aggressive refusal to allow land in this region to be demarcated for white farming projects had led to his arrest in 1947. He was incarcerated at Hammanskraal, north of Johannesburg, where he died, a “pioneering hero of the struggle”, in 1959.

In a dramatic, well executed and highly symbolic move, Kennedy Tshivhase arrived at the ceremony in a manner to which his grandfather would have been accustomed. Instead of the more contemporary entrance with a large entourage in blacked-out luxury vehicles, he surprised the crowd by riding up the winding, crowded road through the courtyard to the stage on horseback – clad in a bright white jacket and accompanied only by a handler. It was a masterful stroke that guaranteed wide media coverage and placed him firmly at the centre of the turbulent Venda political arena.

Accepting the award on behalf of his grandfather, Tshivhase launched into a long speech in which he recalled the lengthy credentials of his dynasty in the struggle against minority rule. From where he stood in the arena, he pointed to the surrounding villages and asserted that the absence of white owned agricultural land in the area was testimony to the house of Tshivhase's “steadfast and resolute courage in the face of a challenge to its kingdom.” He reminded the crowd of his own support and commitment to underground structures during his university career in the 1980s and of his Supreme Court victory over the fading homeland administration in 1993 to reclaim his throne; “they [those associated with apartheid authorities] knew if I could come back and take over my kingdom – they would be in trouble!”

This chapter offers an historical analysis of the ways in which transitions and decisions made in South Africa at the national level have been influential in moulding local struggles for positions of political power among traditional leaders. I focus on one particular aspect of legislation that has remained consistent from the bantustan era to the current democratic dispensation; the insistence that each culturally and linguistically distinct group with a history of traditional leadership should be represented by a single, all powerful "paramount chief".¹³ The strategic responses of traditional leaders in reaction to this legislation formed the over-arching political backdrop to my fieldwork, and they demonstrate the contemporary dynamics of a royal feud that stretches back to pre-colonial interneccine disputes.

Any analysis of chiefly politics in contemporary South Africa must concede to the messy reality through which historical process takes on new forms in current practice (cf. Comaroff 1985: 18-31). In this way, we can attempt to unearth aspects of the internal coherence of a chaotically pluralistic postcolony (Mbembe 1992: 3). In the Venda region, some traditional leaders sought power through association with white minority rule while others have recently achieved influence through their previous support for "resistance" movements. For the royal house of Tshivhase, current success has lain in its emergence with a new leader untainted by the bantustan system and with an accumulation of "moral capital" through ANC connections. The rival house of Mphephu, on the other hand, has struggled to shake off a long association with apartheid era politics but maintains legitimacy in chiefly circles due to its undoubted genealogical seniority. As Oomen (2000: 42; 2005: 226, 245) has shown in the cases of Kgoloko and Rhyne in Sekhukhuneland, it has also been possible for one chieftaincy, under the strategic guidance of a single leader, to change affiliation over time and support, whilst being supported by, successive governments. And yet such an either/or dichotomy underplays the complexities of collaboration and resistance not only in South Africa, but throughout the continent, in

¹³ The six regions with officially recognized traditional leaders in the democratic dispensation are North West, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, the Free State, KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape. South Africa's 11 kings are distributed in these areas (Oomen 2005: 56). There is some confusion in the literature and "on the ground" as to the correct terminology regarding chiefs or kings in South Africa. I use the Tshivenda term *Khosi* (plural *Mahosi*) for king in line with the recent government White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance (July 2003) that recognises the manner in which the term chief became a conventional blanket term only from the beginning of colonialism. A commonly cited, but unsubstantiated reason for this was that the British colonial authorities at the time could accept no other claim to kingship than their very own George V, who was monarch of Great Britain (and by extension of the empire) from 1910 to 1936. For chief i.e. one level below *Khosi*, I use the Tshivenda term *Vhamusanda* (this is only used in the plural – the singular form of the word, *Musanda*, refers to a royal court yard). See figure 2.

spaces constituted by colonial and postcolonial orders (cf. Mbembe 1992 in Cameroon; Lan 1985 in Zimbabwe).

Nonetheless, the institutional support offered to structures of traditional leadership by the ANC-led government caught many by surprise, and there has been a steady trickle of academic attention aimed at providing an explanation. The Venda example reveals the strengths and limitations of current arguments made by Oomen (2005) and Koelble and Lipuma (2005) that explain this “revival” largely by reference to the influence of abstract “global forces” in a new world order. Although such arguments (to which I return in due course) provide an important level of analysis to a complex issue, I argue that they are in danger of under-representing crucial historical (dis)continuities. Through these, traditional leaders justify claims to paramount chieftaincy, and on the basis of them these leaders reinforce essentialist notions of culture and tradition that have deep resonances for certain groups in the post-apartheid era. The precise twists and turns of this recent recourse to traditionalism will constitute an important part of my argument in subsequent chapters about female initiation and the interpretation of sexual illness in the context of AIDS education programmes. In order to do this justice, however, we must start with an historical account of the pre-colonial political environment that was structured by the apartheid authorities in the former homeland.

pre-Colonial Expansion, Subjugation and Early Contact

The very notion of “the Venda” is rooted in pre-colonial patterns of expansion and conquest. The purpose of this section is to outline these historical developments and, in the process, to account for one of the most salient social divisions in the region upon which the current challenge for *Khosikhulu* is based; that between royalty (*vhakololo*) and commoners (*vhasiwana*).

The Venda origin myth recorded in early accounts chimes with the oft-cited sentiments of royal elders to whom I spoke in the field. Although their dates were often at odds with each other, they told of great lakes, possibly in Tanzania (a notion supported by Wilson 1969: 169), a long journey through dense forest (said to be the Congo region) then drier lands (Zambia, Zimbabwe), until eventually they rested for a period of long solitary and

unconquered confinement in the Soutpansberg Mountains (cf. Wessmann 1908: 10; Stayt 1931: 14). Government ethnologist Van Warmelo (1932) also recorded this oral tradition as part of a state sponsored project to document genealogies specifically for use in succession disputes (Hammond-Tooke 1997: 112). He suggested, with others at the time, that Vhavenda were historically shielded from foreign influence by isolation. In support of this now widely-held belief he pointed out the extreme northerly geographical location of Venda, and argued that the Soutpansberg mountain range was a formidable barrier to the flow of contact between other groups in the region.

A more recent account, based on the detailed analysis of clans (*mitupo* sing. *mutupo*) in Venda social structure has refuted this. Ralushai (1977: 17), himself a Muvenda anthropologist and formerly John Blacking's research assistant, argues that the significance of the Soutpansberg mountain range should rather be seen in military terms, such as the successful defence against Shaka's *Mfecane*.¹⁴ As we saw in the Introduction, this has been woven into the myth of Venda isolation epitomised in the advertising campaign for "Africa's Eden". Ralushai, however, discredits the notion of tribal uniqueness, stating instead that "Venda's geographical position between the Rhodesian, Mozambican, Northern Sotho and Tswana (Botswana) areas, has made her a melting pot" (*ibid.*: 19). As evidence of this, he cites the frequent occurrence of both Sotho and Shona words in Tshivenda vocabulary, architectural variations, the presence of "non-Venda" possession cults and male initiation schools throughout the region. Blacking (1995) takes this a stage further by identifying the various musical scales (penta- hexa- and heptatonic) characteristic of specific groups in the region, and interpreting their infiltration into Venda musical practice over time.¹⁵

Although there is evidence to support a migration from "the north", Ralushai demonstrates that it only stretches as far as Zimbabwe, and not to the great lakes region or through the Congo basin. In this, Ralushai is joined by Blacking (1962; 1995), Marks (1975) and Nettleton (1992), who support the notion that in the early 17th Century, there were a

¹⁴ It was this strategic use of the mountain landscape that led to the building of royal households in steep, easily defensible gullies and on top of mountains, which remains a distinguishing feature of the Venda landscape today. The symbolic significance of this has more recently been hijacked by local Christian leaders who now prefer to live in grand houses, on hillsides preferably above their churches.

¹⁵ Kruger (1999) has conducted similar research tracing modern Venda political history through the variation in lyrical construction of a Venda genre, *Tshigombela*.

number of aboriginal clans (*Ngwaniwapo* lit. original inhabitants) scattered over the Soutpansberg area, commonly referred to as Vhangona groups (sing. Ngona) with a degree of political centralisation in at least two powerful ruling houses of Tshivhula and Tavhatsindi. Archaeological evidence suggests that groups of Ngona were living in the Soutpansberg region as early as the 15th Century (Lahiff 2000: 60). These scattered clans had, it is argued, established exchange and kinship relations across the Limpopo River by the mid 17th Century, and shared a significant social and cultural affinity with the Shona, Shangaan/Tsonga and Northern Sotho. Moreover, they developed an extensive cosmology in which links to the Lobedu "Rain Queen" (Modjadji) in the south east were particularly strong (Kridge and Kridge 1943) and consolidated elaborate ritual cycles through which a specific musical tradition was borne (Blacking 1995: 139). It is likely that this cosmological connection with Modjadji was influential in the tempering of Zulu aggression towards Vhangona, given that Shaka passed through Lobedu territory with great deference to, and elaborate gifts for, the powerful Queen who was widely believed to control the rain (cf. Kridge and Kridge 1943; McGregor Forthcoming).

In the late 17th Century, a wave of Singo clans from Zimbabwe who were fleeing violence between the Shona royal families relating to upheavals in Rowzi society and the rise of Changamire dynasty (Marks 1975) moved south across the Limpopo river and into Vhangona territory. They settled among them in what has widely been termed a "conquest", building their headquarters at Dzata in the middle of the Nzhelele valley (see Map 4). The invading Singo clans had little to offer the Ngona culturally, but brought with them extensive skills in regional administration and the mobilisation of military power from the comparatively advanced Karanga civilisations of Zimbabwe. They did not attempt to destroy what they found, but rather "patronized the arts, made a pact with the priests, magicians and ritual experts, married local women and adopted some local customs" (Blacking 1995: 139). Singo clans thus became the dominant political and military force in the area and spread a thick layer of political centralisation over groups of Ngona.¹⁶

¹⁶ Blacking's poetic use of the term "priests" belies the complexity of structures of traditional healing in Venda. Tshivenda speakers distinguish between four different types of traditional healer. An *Inyanga* is responsible for overall spiritual protection from witches, and may practice witchcraft themselves. *Inyangas* divine by means of interpreting the patterns in which *thangu* (ritual bones/stones/shells) fall onto the floor during a session and they can also administer medicine (*mushonga*) for good luck with money, women, exams etc. A *mungome*, who is usually Shangaan and attached to a specific royal court, is normally consulted when a relative dies, and can identify the killer by interpreting *thangu* in a divining bowl (*ndilo*). A *maine* (family doctor: singular and plural) does not use *thangu*, but learns through dreams which herbs can cure specific illnesses. Different *maine* specialize in different conditions, such as Vha Nyatshavhungwa,

Their success in doing so can be measured to an extent in that the most influential traditional leaders in Venda today from the royal households of Mphephu and Tshivhase trace their decent to the great Singo warrior Dimbanyika and his son Thohoyandou, who led the Singo clan across the Limpopo River (Van Warmelo 1932: 6; Lestrade 1932; Ralushai 1977). However, there are 25 recognised kingships in Venda, and not all are of Singo origin. The less powerful kings in areas such as Lwamondo, Makuya and Manenzhe, for example, trace their lineage to Ngona occupancy (see Map 2). There are also less powerful Singo kingdoms, such as Khahku and Rambuda. This conglomerate can be explained by the ways in which the Singo “invaders” did not wage war on the occupants of the Soutpansberg, but incorporated elements of their political system, and thus the most important political factions, into their centralised system of government (cf. Kopytoff 1987). The socio-political division between “royal” (*vhakololo*) and “common” (*vhasiwana*) must thus be seen as the product of historical process through which Singo invaders *became* royal and, in the process, subjugated the Ngona occupants of the Soutpansberg mountains to commoner status.

The association between the Mphephu house and colonial structures of power began officially in 1925 under the leadership of George Mbulaheni Mphephu, but dates back to at least a hundred years earlier. From the Great Trek in 1836, when the town of Schoemansdal (later to become Louis Trichardt and today known as Makhado – see Maps 2 and 3) was founded, the Mphephu house has periodically fought, negotiated and lived peacefully with white travellers, missionaries, traders and settlers (Gieseck 2004). Van Warmelo for example provides an account of Louis Trichardt’s involvement in local political struggles in the area at this time (1932: 19-20). In apparent contradiction to this, however, Kirkaldy notes that whilst German Lutheran missionaries were permitted to settle in the Tshivhase region from the 1870s, Mphephu (at the time under the name of Makhado) withheld permission for the establishment of any Christian mission within his borders as he believed that they “prepared the ground for the Boers” (2005: 265).

who are experts in children’s health (see Chapter 5). Clans may hold allegiance to a line of *maine* for generations. The last category is *Vhaporofhiti*, prophets in Zionist and Apostolic churches who combine healing with church leadership and often replace herbs with holy water. Of course, these categories are frequently breached and an *inyanga* may claim to be able to cure various illnesses whilst a *maine* may offer spiritual protection. This is explained by the fact that it is not the prerogative of the individual to be a traditional healer – but their actions are controlled by ancestors.

A close reading of the historical sources suggests that Tshivhase sought an alliance with the missionaries to bolster his genealogical inferiority (cf. Comaroff 1985: 29; White 1989). Most Venda historians accept Van Warmelo's assertion that Mphephu is the most senior king in the region. Although it is not my intention here to provide a detailed historical analysis of Venda royal conflicts (see Ralushai 1977), a brief explanation is necessary. The chiefly line of Mphephu has been the most powerful and influential of the Venda monarchies during the period of recorded history and up to the bantustan era. In about 1790, the legendary leader, and the first paramount chief (*Khosikhulu*) Thohoyandou, died at Dzata. His two sons fought for succession to the throne, but neither succeeded. The elder son, Mpofu (Mphephu), fled west to Songozwi, the mountain above present day Makhado. He was later forced north to Zimbabwe by British forces after the Anglo-Boer war, and then returned to Dzata to establish his royal kraal at Dzanani, where it remains today.¹⁷ The younger son of an inferior wife, Raluswielo, fled east to Dopeni, pillaging and torching villages on the way, and then to Phiphidi where he became known as Midiyavhathu Tshivhase (lit. the one who burnt everybody's houses; Tshivhase coming from the root *u vhasa*, to burn). In search of secure headquarters during *Mfecane*, he then migrated north east to the mountains of Mukombani where the seat of the Tshivhase throne remains today (Ralushai 1977: 162).¹⁸ Since this split between the two brothers, the history of Venda kingship has been marked by dynastic struggles both within and between the houses of Mphephu and Tshivhase: a fact well documented by Lestrade (1932) Nemudzivhadi (1985), Ralushai (1977), Lahiff (2000), Fokwang (2003).

Subsequent episodes of royal division, as with other South African and southern African chieftaincies, were largely mapped onto the schism between colonial-collaborators and resisters (cf. for example Delius 1996, Lan 1985), although this was much more complex

¹⁷ According to my oral histories from Mphephu elders, Mpofu established several homesteads across the Limpopo in present day Zimbabwe and instructed them to remain their as a safe periphery to which he could again withdraw in times of crisis. This was offered as an explanation for the small pockets of Tshivenda speakers to be found in Zimbabwe to this day, although it is not clear exactly how many of them trace decadency to this historical drama.

¹⁸ Van Warmelo (1932 4-16) offers an alternative account of this historical transition, but comes to the same conclusion as Ralushai that Mphephu is the senior royal lineage. Ralushai (1977) however, offers a comprehensive and compelling critique of Van Warmelo's historical summaries of Venda, pointing to important inconsistencies and their relationship to the inherent bias of his main informants. Of importance here may be that they disagree on the identity of the "original" paramount chief. Van Warmelo argues that it was not Thohoyandou, but Ndymbeu who, in Van Warmelo's analysis, was Thohoyandou's father (1932: 2). As Ralushai himself admits somewhat sheepishly, "Besides, there has been so much movement and intermingling in Venda that it is impossible to know the truth." (1977: 30)

in practice (more of which below). The alliance between Mphephu and the apartheid state and the tendency for neighbouring leaders with allegiance to Tshivhase to support “liberation” structures thus facilitated the continuation of pre-existing political cleavages and the decision taken by the apartheid authorities to install Patrick Mphephu as paramount chief, initiating the political dominance of one royal family during the homeland era, had far reaching consequences in the turbulent landscape of Venda traditional authority. As we will see, the recent decision taken by the ANC-led government to initiate the selection process for a contemporary paramountcy has again brought this historical rivalry into the political economy of Venda traditional leadership: coating it with new significance in the post-apartheid era.

Venda as a TBVC State: The Chieftaincy and “Development”

Turning back to recent history, the so called “independent” homelands of Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei, (known as the TVBC states) were far from autonomous. They were, to a significant extent, controlled socially, economically and politically by specially-designated structures within the apartheid state. From Pretoria, the Department of Native Affairs, (later Department of Bantu Affairs and endlessly renamed thereafter) maintained relationships of control and dependency by the administration and monitoring of funding through substantial loans or grants. Moreover, the Department trained TVBC intelligence and security agencies to operate as remote extensions of Apartheid surveillance networks, whilst the South African Police could operate without hindrance within homeland borders (Ashforth 1997; Herholdt and Dombo 1992: 85; Africa 1992; Egero 1991).

Indeed, since the Black Administrations Act (No. 38) in 1927, the policies of successive colonial, apartheid and bantustan administrations have moulded dominant political configurations in the areas reserved for black habitation. Having been seriously undermined during the course of the nineteenth century by military defeat and a subsequent loss of land, traditional structures of kingship were revived primarily as a new and convenient form of administration in the “native reserves”. The many acts of legislation that were passed at this time provided for the appointment of kings (or as they became known – chiefs) and village headmen by the South African government. They

were paid and held responsible for the collection of taxes, distribution of pensions, allocation of communal land and the administration of customary law through tribal courts (cf. Gluckman *et al.* 1949; Comaroff 1974; Comaroff and Roberts 1981; Lahiff 2000; Ngwane 2004).

Through the provision of these services, traditional authorities became one of the only gateways through which people (the "subjects") could access the state (as "citizens"). For example, birth certificates were essential in order to procure a pass that permitted employment in white areas (cf. Mamdani 1996). This remained the case to some extent during my fieldwork, with tribal authorities throughout the Venda region being inundated with requests for birth and death certificates, without which carers of children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic could not receive, *inter alia*, their state welfare grant (cf. Natrass 2007). However the extent to which this is experienced as a bifurcation of citizen and subject under democracy is less than clear. This distinction has been blurred by traditional leaders who embrace democracy and seek legitimisation not only through royal ancestry but by the ballot box.

By 1948, with the coming to power of the National Party and the official establishment of apartheid, this system intensified "for the purposes of reproducing and exercising control over a cheap African industrial labour force" (Wolpe 1972: 450). As Wolpe suggests, although in a less functionalist manner than in his account, a central tenet of the bantustan system was indeed to provide rural bases for migrant workers, and to limit the extent of state welfare through reliance on extended family networks.

Thompson (1985: 197) develops this point but recognises its reliance on an ideological as well as an economic motive. He argues that the homeland policy also relied on "racial theory in an extreme organicist form, likening races to organisms that have distinctive cultural as well as physical properties and characteristic courses of development". The apartheid government, supported by *Volkekunde* ethnologists, maintained that Europeans were culturally superior to any "bantu race" and that in order for these courses of development to proceed the different "races" had to be separated in as exclusive a manner as possible. The bolstering of traditional structures of power and the construction of puppet governments in so-called homelands was thus intended to achieve much more than a convenient layer of bureaucratic administration in rural bases for migrant

labourers. Within the wider ideological parameters of apartheid, the rejuvenation of kingship in rural areas was central to the process of “retribalisation”, intended to function as a hegemonic tool in the legitimisation of racially motivated segregation (Vail 1989). In this way, culture was mobilised in an attempt to rationalise the policy through which Africans were supposedly shielded from outside forces of modernity by the codification of traditions in their own exclusive homelands. For these reasons, we must use the term “traditional leaders” with extreme caution, in the knowledge that whilst such structures do have a pre-colonial past, they are to a significant extent a construct of more recent political forces (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1997).

In the Venda region, the Bantu Authorities act of 1951 involved the identification and subsequent creation of 25 separate “Tribal Authorities”, three “Regional Authorities” and one “Territorial Authority”. Each of the 25 Tribal Authorities constituted a separate chiefdom, of which the houses of Mphephu and Tshivhase were widely acknowledged to be the most senior. Through these structures, the South African government implemented more or less malleable forms of government in the homelands, and the seats of power in homeland government were generally taken by powerful traditional leaders. This was influenced by the assumption that they derived allegiance and respect of “their people” through patronage, ritual and symbolic power (cultural capital, in Bourdieu’s terms) as opposed to coercive force (Beall *et al.* 2005: 760). Of course, traditional leadership has never been accepted passively, and the apartheid authorities underestimated the extent to which chiefly power was in a continuous dialectical relationship with public opinion.¹⁹

Nonetheless, following this pattern, *Khosi* Patrick Mphephu was appointed Chief Executive Councillor in the Thohoyandou Bantu Authority in 1962, which was granted partial “self rule” as the Venda Territorial Authority in October 1969. Self-rule was limited at this stage in that the apartheid authorities in South Africa remained in charge of security, economic policy, foreign relations and could veto *any decision* taken by the Venda government. In a similar vein to that in which Koelbe and Lipuma have described Kaiser Matanzima in the former homeland of Transkei, Patrick Mphephu was “not a

¹⁹ See Comaroff (1974) for a detailed discussion of this, and the ways in which chiefs were incorporated into homeland government in Bophuthatswana. See Beall *et al.* (2005) for a similar discussion regarding chiefs in the former homeland of Kwazulu.

comrade in the struggle against apartheid...[he] was an important black collaborator in the establishment and functioning of apartheid and certainly one of its few black beneficiaries" (2005: 74). In his inaugural address, Patrick Mphephu stressed the need for stronger co-operation between authorities in Venda and the Republic of South Africa:

[M]y councillors and I promise to work for the advancement of Vendaland. We have been co-operating with the [South African] government since the time of President Paul Kruger [1880s]...who gave us the reserves on which we are now residing. (Venda Traditional Authority – Minutes of the First Session, 6-9 October 1969, in Herholdt and Dombo 1992: 74).

The Territorial Authority was replaced by a National Legislative Assembly in 1971, and by February 1973, Venda became a self-governing nation-state with two distinct political formations: the Venda Independence Peoples Party (VIPP) led by Johannesburg sociologist Baldwin Mudau and the Venda National Party (VNP) that consisted mainly of chiefs and headmen under the leadership of *Khosi* Patrick Mphephu. Although the VIPP won the majority of 18 contested seats in elections to the Legislative Assembly in 1973 and 1978, the VNP held onto power through the support of 42 un-elected chiefs and headmen, most of whom were selected from or sympathetic towards Mphephu (Herholdt and Dombo 1992). In September 1979 Venda was declared an "independent" republic but, like the other TVBC states, was not recognized beyond the Republic of South Africa. Patrick Mphephu was subsequently installed as paramount chief, Head of Government and Life President of the Legislative Assembly; a title which sounded ludicrous but proved prophetic when he died in April 1988 from suspected poisoning.

Given the oppositional support for the VIPP during the bantustan period, the Mphephu government was in a constant dialogue with the population to maintain some form of legitimacy. Whilst their position of power hinged, ultimately, on unquestioned genealogical superiority, the role of unelected chiefs in the Legislative Assembly and a monopoly on violence, the concern for a veneer of legitimate government provoked policy implications in the homeland. To be sure, most of this policy was "handed down" to TVBC states from the apartheid authorities, which Mphephu deployed in a manner that was seemingly in the best interests of "his" people. To this extent the Mphephu regime was characterised by the intercalary nature of traditional authority described by Gluckman *et al.* (1949). But in this process, as Kuper (1970) reminds us, there was also significant

room for manoeuvre (cf. James [1990] for an example of chiefs in the Lebowa homeland who dispensed patronage through agricultural schemes). In this way, Mphephu's options were curtailed by a triad of influences from the apartheid state, the citizenry and the kingship. Within this, he attempted to balance support and demands within his own royal house and as representative of "the Venda" more generally but, ultimately, although support from the citizenry was deemed preferable, it was never *necessary*: the pretence of legitimacy was closely shadowed by recourse to institutionalised violence.

This pretence, however, shaped the policy agenda of the time in terms of a pervasive approach to "development". This can be traced back to the Nationalist government of the 1950s, which enlisted the assistance of F.R. Tomlinson in constructing a strategy by which the human carrying capacity of the homelands (at that time known as native reserves) could be increased and sustained. The result was a comprehensive scheme for the rehabilitation of the reserves "with a view to developing within them a social structure in keeping with the culture of the native and based on effective socio-economic planning" (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 392). Although the recommendations in the Tomlinson Commission were never implemented the Verwoerd government was convinced to embark on a process of "development" that, it was hoped, would facilitate the long term sustainability of the racial segregation upon which apartheid was based (cf. Ashforth 1990). In this way, "development" during the apartheid era was posited first and foremost as a potential solution to "the native problem" and its implementation served to provide a façade of legitimacy; two birds with the one proverbial stone.

As a result, some decades after the non-implementation of the Tomlinson Commission, the Verwoerd government tried various strategies, with limited success. For example, some industrial enterprises were lured by large tax concessions to relocate on the borders between black and white areas. It was hoped that this would draw as many "surplus" blacks as possible away from the established (white) industrialised areas. Support schemes were established for the promotion and subsidy of large scale commercial agriculture within the reserves. In addition to this, the government remained committed to the implementation of betterment – a policy that predated apartheid and was initially concerned with land conservation and the prevention of soil erosion in the reserves. Throughout the apartheid era, betterment was intensified. It became concerned largely with the macro-scale rationalisation and restructuring of land holdings

and settlement patterns through which people living in the homelands were forced to live in grid-like villages with fixed allocations of land (between 0.5 and 1.5 hectares [Lahiff 2000: 21]) for subsistence farming (cf. de Wet 1995). The size of these plots, however, was widely held to be inadequate, and they provided at best a subsidiary source of food for the rural poor. Nonetheless, the apartheid regime (through the Mphephu government, in the Venda case) continued to sideline subsistence projects in favour of support for large-scale commercial enterprises. There were some exceptions to this, such as the provision of smallholder irrigation schemes and support for private orchards run by community-based (i.e. through the king) organisations (cf. Lahiff 2000).

In Venda, the policy of support for large enterprises was manifest in several forms. Two tea estates and a coffee estate were constructed in partnership with Sapekoe – a private firm with expertise in industrial cultivation of tea and coffee throughout southern Africa. Firms such as Sapekoe were attracted to invest in the homelands primarily by the subsidies provided by the South African government and the vast pools of cheap labour. Throughout the bantustan era, the tea estates employed a core staff of up to 1000 and seasonal pickers numbered roughly 3000. As we see in Chapter 6, the Venda tea estates have recently been the focus of moral panic over a spate of alleged poisonings. Ultimately, however, they only provided substantial benefit for two relatively small elites: black managers and the small circle of white “experts” imposed by Sapekoe who were paid vastly higher salaries for the assumed inconvenience of working in a black area.

When the South African government passed the Bantu Homelands Development Corporations Act (1965), it began the task of setting up development corporations – funded by the Southern African Development Bank – in each of the homelands (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 426). Some years later, the Venda Development Corporation (VDC) was established. Venda government propaganda at the time gave the VDC the adulation of being the “most important public body in the homeland” (Bureau for Economic Research 1979: 8). Although the VDC was involved in maintaining large-scale projects such as the tea estates and canning factories, it was designed to assist the economic development of the homeland in more diverse ways. The VDC was charged with generating “sustainable employment” and moved more in the direction of promoting tourism, arts, crafts and leisure. In 1981, the VDC established Agriven – the Venda Agricultural Corporation Ltd. The main objective of Agriven was to provide support for

medium sized agricultural projects that were ultimately to be taken over by private entrepreneurs (Lahiff 2000: 88). Agriven increasingly became involved in joint ventures with private investors. Projects such as the packaging of fruits and nuts in on-farm factories throughout Venda were relatively successful in providing employment opportunities, but again provided substantial benefits only for the small elite of commercial farmers in the region.

In an attempt to achieve the desired diversity in economic development, the VDC became involved in several other projects. It coordinated the creation of an industrial estate at Shayandima in which clothing factories, bakeries, garages and a brewery were established. It developed caravan parks, walking trails and cultural trails on which tourists (mostly white South Africans on their way to or from the Kruger National Park) could experience "Africa" from the safety of their vehicles and, by arrangement through various tour guides, observe activities such as traditional dancing, wood carving and certain stages of female initiation ceremonies.

Possibly the two most successful enterprises initiated by the VDC were the *Ditike* arts and crafts centre and the Venda Sun hotel; both of which remain attractions in the area today, albeit under different, private ownership. *Ditike* (lit. "stand up on your own"/"support yourself") was strategically placed on the main road into the capital town of Thohoyandou, and was for many years a source of income and inspiration for Venda's many talented artists. It still stands today as a tourist information/café/craft shop. A few of its artists, such as Noriah Mobasa, Avhashoni Manganye and Mishak Raphelarani, have achieved significant international recognition from their early exposure at *Ditike*. During the homeland era, The Venda Sun Hotel was the jewel in the crown of the VDC. Boasting a large swimming pool, casino, cinema, air-conditioned *en suite* rooms and conference facilities, the hotel was Venda's first concrete, consumable symbol of what development projects could achieve. It not only accommodated tourists or visiting officials to the area, but was regularly frequented by white South Africans who could indulge in gambling and, on Saturday evenings, view pornographic films; activities that were illegal in South Africa but, conveniently, permitted in the homelands.

Although this flurry of developmental activity may seem almost impressive – as indeed it was intended to – it does not appear to have made any significant impact on the

homeland economy. Seekings and Nattrass (2005) provide a passing insight into the relatively homogenous socioeconomic profile of Venda at the end of the “Grand Apartheid” period. They remind us that most income at the time came from migrant labour remittances sent home by family members, state sponsored businesses (such as agricultural wholesalers) and the regular incomes of civil servants (*ibid.*: 95-98). By the mid 1970s in Venda, this led to a situation whereby 46% of the population had an annual income of between R500-999, 4% had between R1,500-1,999 and only 3% had between R3,000-15,000 (*ibid.*: 119). This would suggest that in Venda, although there was extreme inequality at the time, the vast majority of people survived on broadly similar, albeit low, incomes.

Thus, whilst the bantustan era was characterised by – even based on – “retribalisation” and the fortification of essentialist, racist ideals of the “tribal subject”, this was simultaneous with the explicit attempt at legitimisation by the glossing of development/“modernisation” projects over a distinctly underdeveloped social reality (cf. Bozzoli’s analysis of racial modernism in Alexandria [2000, 2004]). This seemingly contradictory set of processes brought about a peculiar socio-political arrangement whereby some revelled in resistance (see below), some succumbed to the seduction of the ideological construct of separate development, and many others actively avoided politics; in the words of one elderly man; “I simply tried to live my live and feed my family as best I could” (Z.Z 2/02/05). To be sure, this was a safe option given that the Mphephu regime was characterised by political intimidation, allegations of torture, widespread corruption and nepotism. However, despite the state’s frequent abuse of violence, during fieldwork (and in numerous visits to Venda since 1994), it has been impossible to ignore the consistency of comments made by some who claimed they were “better off during apartheid”. In the words of a popular reggae song by Khakhathi Tshisikule, “At least the traffic lights worked under Mphephu, when we worked on the farms, a job back then was at least safe, oh! The sweet memories of employment!”

Although this perhaps sheds more light on a perceived lack of delivery and disillusionment with the current dispensation, this dirge nonetheless represents an important perspective that has been under-reported by journalists and academics alike whereby the puppet regimes of bantustan states secured at least a veneer of legitimacy with some people through the promotion of development projects. That the projects were

manipulated to dispense nepotistic patronage is hardly surprising, but, to some limited extent, this “worked” (Chabal and Daloz 1999). In this way, the paradoxical co-existence of contradictory discourses based on traditionalism and modernisation was the sum of Mphephu’s attempts to secure a broad-based support in the citizenry, balanced with the demands of his royal house and the apartheid state to move towards socio-economic progress whilst upholding traditional leadership in the homeland.

For all its efforts, however, the Mphephu regime never achieved broad-based support in Venda. After his death in 1988, Patrick Mphephu was succeeded as State President by his cousin Frank Ravele, previously Minister for Economic Affairs and Tourism who was a close affine and ally in the VNP. Ravele’s brief flirtation with the Presidency was marred by allegations that members of the cabinet were involved in ritual murder, by student protests against corruption and by widespread violence relating to a perceived increase in the practice of witchcraft. With the un-banning of the ANC and release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, the “independent” Venda was rendered practically ungovernable by ANC supporters who, through widely successful strikes and demonstrations, demanded the end of apartheid and the bantustan system (cf. Le Roux 1998 in Venda; Delius 1996; Niehaus 2001). Institutions and representatives of traditional and generational authority were targeted by groups of ANC youth league “comrades” who embarked on a spate of witch-hunts in which several elderly people and police officers lost their lives, and which forced many chiefs and headmen to seek refuge in police stations. Under this unbearable pressure for change, Ravele relinquished power in a non-violent military coup led by Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana of the Venda Defence Forces (supported by the South African Defence Force) in 1990.

Subsequent events seem to have been shaped by this groundswell of popular feeling and targeted towards the institution of paramount chieftaincy. In 1991, the military administration announced the Mushasha commission to investigate the role of traditional leadership in the homeland. Echoing the Institute for Race Relations report (SAIRR 1980: 334-5), the Mushasha commission concluded that the position of *Khosikhulu* was “unknown in Venda custom” although to be more accurate the title had been vacant since Thohoyandou’s disappearance from Dzata in the late 1700s. Ramushwana promptly drafted legislation and abolished the position: symbolically removing the royal house of Mphephu from its position of unparalleled power and influence in the homeland. He also

disbanded the Legislative Assembly and became chairman of a Council of National Unity – paving the way for four years of benevolent military dictatorship during which “state structures and public services in Venda virtually collapsed” (Lahiff 2000: 73). In 1993, with the inevitability that Nelson Mandela would soon be President of the new South Africa, Ramushwana publicly “crossed over” to join the ANC, and in 1994 Venda became part of the Northern (later Limpopo) Province of the newly unified South Africa.

Table 1: Chronology of Main Political Events

Year	Political Development
1962	Patrick Mphephu appointed as Chief Executive Councillor in Thohoyandou Bantu Authority.
1969	Partial ‘self-rule’ granted to the Venda Territorial Authority.
1973	Venda becomes a ‘self governing nation state’ with a Legislative Assembly and two political parties – VNP and VIPP.
1979	Declaration of Independence: Mphephu declared ‘paramount chief’ (<i>Khosikhulu</i>) and ‘life president’.
1988	Death of Mphephu / Ravele becomes president.
1990	Non-violent military coup led by Brigadier Gabriel Ramushwana following widespread demonstrations.
1991	Mushasha commission abolishes position of <i>Khosikhulu</i> and symbolically removes the Mphephu royal house from power.
1994	The former Venda is incorporated into the new democratic South Africa as part of Northern (later Limpopo) Province

Collaboration and Resistance

During Venda’s “independence” following 1979, much South African legislation remained applicable in the homeland. A fundamental task of the bantustan administrations – as the apartheid authorities saw it – was to collaborate with them in providing and supporting intelligence networks for the implementation of the South African Terrorism Act (No. 83 of 1967) which allowed for extensive periods of detention without charge or trial. These networks were primarily involved in identifying “subversive” (i.e. anti-apartheid)

movements which, in Venda, were loosely but by no means exclusively associated with Baldwin Mudau's Venda Independence Peoples Party.

After the suspicious disappearance of several members of the opposition under interrogation, and upon hearing the testimony of an exiled Venda Lutheran Dean, Amnesty International reported in a rare document, refreshingly frank under the strict censorship of the time, that "the authorities in Venda should act without delay to prevent further possible abuses of fundamental rights, [and]...establish a formal inquiry into allegations of torture of political detainees and conditions of detention" (Amnesty International 1983: 3). However, a widespread policy and practice of detention, torture, bribery, corruption and violence continued to characterize the operations of the intelligence agencies and security police (Lahiff 2000: 72; Herholdt and Dombo 1992: 78; Fokwang 2003: 38). After many of its members were intimidated and detained without charge by the security police during the 1984 elections to the National Assembly, for example, the VIPP took no seats and Venda effectively became a one-party state (Herholdt and Dombo 1992: 80). This became official in 1986 when Mphephu amended the constitution to make the VNP the only legal political party in the homeland.

This environment of political intimidation and violence instigated rebellion. Most oppositional organisations, however, such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the church based Movement for Democracy (MDM) operated outside of the VIPP and were largely unaffected by homeland politics. The UDF and the MDM, at varying degrees during different periods, acted in Venda as they did throughout South Africa as secretive, internal wings of the (then illegal) ANC. They sought to change minority rule by organising demonstrations, labour strikes, small-scale terrorist activities and education campaigns amongst university students and school children. Importantly, the geographical position of Venda on the border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique rendered the area central in providing safe houses for members of the ANC crossing secretly in and out of South Africa. As a current ANC councillor told me:

[W]e were just told where to collect them by the [Limpopo] river, and where to drop them off. We never asked their names or their mission because the less we knew the better for everybody. Anyway they would not talk about that. Sometimes we did not even talk at all...only giving them food in the dark and a bed to sleep in...even my wife and children did not know and did not ask...yes, sometimes it was [frightening] because we did not know if so-and-so was

[working for government] intelligence, but we were angry and determined to beat the system...that's what it was like back then (Interview with P.M. 25/06/05).

A middle-aged woman, also an ANC member and high ranking member of the Tshivhase royal family, recalled that:

[w]e did not talk about these things back then, even now you can find people telling lies to you, that they were not involved when you can find that they were [involved]...yes, the less you knew the better. I remember we beat a young woman at the [water] pump, in 1980 I think, because she was spreading gossip about spies sleeping in her neighbour's yard. She was lucky; you could have been killed for such gossip back then. We [ANC members] used to joke that we were the perfect witches, moving about at night and not being seen! (Interview with N.N. 12/04/05)

Although I could not gather enough data to plot the precise nature of connections between such individuals, or of families' political affiliations or party membership at this time, some patterns such as the divergence between Mphephu and Tshivhase are evident. This pattern was replicated throughout South Africa and many "great chieftains resisted manfully white intrusion" (Luthuli 1961 in Beall *et al.* 2005: 762) whilst others danced to the beat of the intruders.

But such a script is woefully inadequate. Firstly, it should be underlined that enmity between so-called "collaborators" and "resisters" had, more often than not, a structural and historical element that pre-dated colonialism and missionisation. This was the case, for example, with Tshidi chiefdoms among Tswana whereby Montshiwa, leader of the "traditional" royals was to come into conflict with his less-powerful half brother Molema who, having converted to Christianity, assumed a leadership role among the literate elite. "Not only did this introduce an ideological contrast which was to give new voice to existing internal cleavages, it also became the basis of the renegotiation of power relations surrounding the chieftship." (Comaroff 1985: 30) Molema showed signs of mounting a challenge to his half brother before his death, and his followers (the intelligentsia) continued to contest Montshiwa's followers' rights to office (1985: 33). But in the face of a common adversary (the Afrikaner Nationalist Party), the two united in opposition and neither the chief nor the intelligentsia cooperated with this new authority "except in the most perfunctory manner" (1985: 39).

The Tshidi example demonstrates the historical importance of chiefly rivalry. Even if the missionaries or the Nationalist Party had bypassed them, Montshiwa would have remained at odds with his half brother, but the forces of colonial power interrupted and influenced their pre-existing disputes. Moreover, in uniting against a common enemy they demonstrated the potential temporality of such divisions. Like in Venda, any notion of collaboration or resistance must be problematised and situated in historical terms where we are likely to find a more fluid and fragmented arrangement that reflects the banality of a dichotomous interpretation of historical process (cf. Mbembe 1992, Bayart 1993). For example the heroic struggle narrative of the Chiwese chiefdom in northern Zimbabwe that was the only royal house to remain in opposition to the state whilst "all the other houses...had fallen under the rule of men prepared to co-operate" (Lan 1985: 138) does not reflect the complexities of the ways in which chiefly authority interacted with colonial structures of power such as the Venda example demonstrates. Thus it would be misleading to suggest that every Tshivhase leader has been associated with "the struggle", or that every Mphephu one was a government stooge. The situation was much more fluid and fragmented.

As I suggested above, Mphephu was more than an intercalary figure, hamstrung between the apartheid state and the demands of his subjects (Gluckman *et al.* 1949; Kuper 1970). He sought, explicitly, to use his position of power to undercut the support base of his historical rival. During his corrupt and often violent presidency, several influential headmen and chiefs under Tshivhase were co-opted into government structures. Many remained complicit through silence, and others were tempted into civil service positions by impressive salaries or other persuasive factors. The opulent houses that were built at the time for cabinet members and senior civil servants were still standing during my fieldwork, although the heated indoor swimming pools, jacuzzis, saunas and double drive-in garages had fallen into disrepair. Patrick Mphephu had clearly thought it wise to keep potential enemies close to him. He took his opportunity well, and recruited actively among the traditional leaders connected to his historical rival at a time when many (but by no means all) were seriously considering material advantages over kinship obligations. Political collaboration thrived in this environment in which siding with Mphephu could lead to the accumulation of significant personal wealth, but such a move was always a gamble, balanced against the potential loss of legitimacy in the eyes of those involved in the struggle.

Influential collaborators in Venda included Chief Muofhe of Tsianda who was Minister of Communications during the twilight of Mphephu's cabinet. Patrick Mphephu's portrait hangs in the royal council hut of Tsianda to this day. Another well-known collaborator, and one of the most influential members of the bantustan government, was the notorious A.A. Tshivhase; Member of Parliament and Headman in the Duthuni region. He was a charismatic, controversial and significant figure whose colourful political career ended abruptly in a ritual murder scandal during the late 1980s (cf. Le Roux 1988). As with many epochs in Venda history, this saga was documented in song. The ANC youth league, also illegal at the time, chanted a powerful call and response in *toyi toyi* to:²⁰

<i>Alidzuli, Alidzuli</i>	[His first name] – meaning not to be seated
<i>A.A. Tshivhase, Eish!</i>	A.A. Tshivhase, waw!
<i>O via</i>	He has committed ritual murder
<i>O via na nnyi naa?</i>	Who was his accomplice in this?
<i>Na Bobo, weah!</i>	With Bobo! (nickname of his close friend)

Although such a move risked the loss of popular support, a standard had been set for high ranking Tshivhase figures to side with Mphephu. Possibly the most significant collaborator and definitely the most symbolic in indicating the pervasiveness of Mphephu's grip on traditional leadership, was John Shavhani Tshivhase. Shavhani was the regent in charge of the Tshivhase throne from 1970 until 1993, and he held several cabinet level positions during his time in government. Kennedy Midiyavhathu, the current king, was originally enthroned in 1970 at the age of 9, but after threats were made on his life by rival contenders to the throne, the royal council relocated him to Pretoria, where he lived with his grandmother. His uncle Shavhani was installed as regent, ruling until Kennedy was deemed old enough to preside. That time came in 1993, and it took a Supreme Court ruling in Kennedy's favour to force his uncle out of power, and to herald a new era in Venda politics that would struggle to shake off the deep seated connections with the past.

²⁰ *Toyi toyi* is a form of protest dance that became popular among liberation groups during the struggle against Apartheid. It involves flamboyant and energetically rhythmical jumping from left foot to right, usually with clenched fists thrown into the air. McGregor suggests this was symbolic of the preparation for warfare (2005). I return to the music of the struggle and its contemporary relevance in Chapter 5.

Having traced some significant political developments of the apartheid era, and the impact they had on structures of traditional leadership in Venda, I will now consider the post-apartheid emergence of *Khosi* Kennedy Tshivhase, who has become the most powerful and influential political figure in the former homeland. Before we can do this, however, we need to consider briefly two arguments that have been made to explain the “comeback” of traditional leadership in South Africa, so that we can return to them after presenting the extended case study of Tshivhase.

Traditional Leaders in the post-Apartheid Dispensation

The ANC-inspired uprisings against institutions of traditional leadership towards the end of apartheid were indicative of a strong resentment against the extent to which chiefs and their henchmen had benefited from their association with the apartheid authorities. They were also indicators, at least for some, that any role given to the institution post-1994 would be extremely limited, giving way to the modernist vision of democracy. And yet traditional leaders have made a remarkable comeback in the post-apartheid era and currently constitute a significant polity held together under the umbrella of CONTRALESA (Council of Traditional Leaders in South Africa). Indeed, according to Koelble and Lipuma (2005: 76), the post-apartheid state spends more than R50 million a month supporting structures of traditional authority. Two important, and related, arguments have been put forward to explain this unexpected turn of events. I summarise each briefly.

Koelble and Lipuma (2005) argue that we cannot understand the role of the state, policy making or the resurgence of traditional leadership in post-apartheid democracy without a careful consideration of the “hierarchy of constraints” imposed on countries such as South Africa by the centrality of speculative capital in the global financial market (cf. Mayekiso 1996 in Ferguson 2006: 105). They argue that, connected to this, transformative movements such as the ANC make “two promises” to the population at the dawn of democracy (Koelble and Lipuma 2005: 77). The first promise is to adopt transparent, democratic policies and the second is to implement institutions that “remedy the injustices inherited from the past” (*ibid.*). Because of the constraints imposed by the market, they argue that the democratic policies inherent in the first promise must follow neoliberal principles that will encourage investment in the country and stability in the currency, which

is not controlled by a central bank but by the power of speculative capital in the global financial market (*ibid.*: 89-90).

For Koelble and Lipuma, the first promise has been kept by the state through the implementation of incremental privatisation and the pursuit of a wider neoliberal economic agenda and evidenced through GEAR (see Chapter 1). Were the equally important second promise to be implemented by the state, however, they argue that the market would interpret this as risk, as possibly even an indication of "socialism". This would lead to a devastating crash in the value of the Rand through the retreat of speculative capital. Traditional leaders, they argue, constitute a polity that is connected to the state but not directly subsumed by it, and can thus implement projects that facilitate the redistribution of wealth without raising the suspicions of the invisible, abstract forces behind the market. For Koelble and Lipuma, then, structures of traditional authority in South Africa have enjoyed a comeback as a means to "penetrate and integrate the hinterlands" with social justice, but due to the historical tensions between the two they remain "uncomfortable allies" (*ibid.*: 92) with the state in this process.

Oomen (2005) takes a similar line, with different emphasis and markedly more concern for historical nuance in her ethnographic examples. She argues that the post-apartheid resurgence of traditional authority should be understood in the context of what she calls a "new world order" (2005: 4). She acknowledges the abuses of the past in which the colonial and apartheid states were involved in a reinvention of tradition and culture in the interests of racial segregation. Oomen goes on to argue, however, that in the last 30 years, the widespread erosion of the nation-state (especially noticeable in the postcolony) has led to the emergence of "heterogeneous, network-like polities, operating locally, trans-nationally and internationally" (2005: 7; cf. Meyer and Geschiere 1999; Young 1999). Traditional leadership in South Africa is thus postulated as a new kind of polity that has grown to fill the void of the shrinking nation-state, and in this way has gained popularity when most thought it would be sidelined. Similar arguments have been made by Chabal and Daloz (1999) and Mamdani (1996).

She takes her argument further than this to engage with the rights-based discourse that has developed internationally in parallel with the loss of state power. Culture and tradition, she claims, are no longer an obstacle to modernisation but a central means through

which to engage with it.²¹ Claims to legitimacy and authenticity are made globally through “first nations” in the United States, in South America, Australia and Botswana. In South Africa, where the right to culture is guaranteed in sections 30 and 31 of the Constitution, it has become integral to the very practice of politics at every level. As guardians of culture, with new responsibilities in local government, Oomen argues that traditional leaders have taken to the stage in a powerful new guise. Traditional leaders in the post-apartheid era are thus much more than an extra bureaucratic arm of the state in the pursuit of rural social justice. Rather, for Oomen, they have re-emerged as cultural icons in the new world order in which, she somewhat galling states, “tribes [are] trendy and culture [is] cool” (2005: 4).

Against this background, I now consider the emergence of *Khosi* Kennedy Tshivhase, whose claim that AIDS education has been incorporated into female initiation constitutes the backbone on the following chapter. I will then return to the two arguments above and assess their strengths and limitations against the historically grounded details of the Venda example.

The Emergence of *Khosi* Kennedy Midiyavhathu Tshivhase

With the exception of John Shavani, the heads of power (*Mahosi*) in the Tshivhase royal house have had a history of engaging with political opposition to colonial and minority rule. Kennedy Tshivhase’s Supreme Court victory over Shavhani in 1993 was thus more than a powerful assertion of his return, as a mature and educated man, to claim the throne of the Tshivhase dynasty from which he had been thwarted as a child. It was a highly symbolic move, through which he was honouring and reinforcing the memory of his father and grandfather.

His father (*Khosi* Prince Thohoyandou Tshivhase) died abruptly in 1966 whilst at the pinnacle of his reign. He had been inaugurated as *Khosi* in 1961, before Mphephu’s ascension to Chief Executive Councillor in 1962 (see tables 1 and 2) and took a radical stance against his rival’s collaboration with white minority rule. Prince was deeply

²¹ The extent to which tradition ever actually prevented Africans from engaging with “the modern” has been questioned by several authors. See for example Vail (1989), Mamdani (1996).

involved in supporting pro-democracy movements and worked in co-operation with several underground organizations. Many of these were covertly staffed by sympathetic Lutheran German missionaries, some of whom were forcefully expelled from South Africa for their involvement with him.

Previous to this, Prince's father, *Khosi Ratsimphi* (who died in detention in 1959), had been a personal friend of Nelson Mandela and was similarly involved with the early liberation struggle to the extent that he was presented with the prestigious Luthuli award as we saw at the opening of the chapter. Ratsimphi was known locally as "Mphaya". He reportedly gave himself this name after the "British Empire", to which he compared his own strength and influence. He has become a mythical figure in the Tshivhase area, and it is not uncommon to overhear elaborate tales of his wealth, his gargantuan *dagga* consumption and remarkable charisma.

The ANC/Tshivhase connection had been born-again in the post-apartheid era. It was endorsed symbolically at Kennedy's lavish re-inauguration ceremony in 1993, when struggle stalwart Walter Sisulu was conspicuously present to give the key note address, which, according to those who were present, turned the ceremony into an "old fashioned political rally" with the effervescence of a religious conversion. In recognition of this long relationship, Mandela flew to Mukombani as President in 1997 to meet Tshivhase, choosing only to visit Mukombani and no other centres of traditional power at that time. Mandela thus granted the new king unparalleled moral capital in the region (Fokwang 2003: 76). In a typically conciliatory move, however, Mandela then attended the inauguration of Tshivhase's arch rival, Toni Peter Mphephu, at Dzanani in November the following year. Toni Mphephu's predecessor, Dimbanyika, had been on friendly terms with Kennedy Tshivhase until his death in a road accident in 1998. They attended functions together, and Kennedy played a leading role at his funeral. The bitter rivalry between Mphephu and Tshivhase which characterises today's political climate is nonetheless exacerbated by very public personal differences between the two young kings.

Table 2: Time-Line of Recent Tshivhase Kings

1931	Ratsimphi installed as <i>Khosi</i> .
1959	Ratsimphi dies in police custody.
1961	Prince (Thohoyandou), Ratsimphi's son, enthroned as <i>Khosi</i> .
1966	<i>Khosi</i> Prince dies.
1970	Kennedy Midiyavhathu (Prince's son) installed as child <i>Khosi</i>
1970	John Shavhani becomes regent
1993	Kennedy wins Supreme Court order, and is re-installed.

During the four year gap in table 2 between the death of Prince in 1966 and the installation of Kennedy in 1970, Tshivhase royal affairs were organised largely by a small inner group who worked to decide who the next king should be. Factional disputes that exist to this day originated at this point. A significant minority opposed the ascension of Kennedy on the grounds of a technicality that his mother had not been chosen – as dictated by convention – by the *Makhadzi* as the mother of the future king.²²

Despite – or perhaps because of – internal factionalism, Kennedy Tshivhase's well-timed entry into the public sphere during the early 1990s was shrewd and strategic. Having been absent from homeland politics during the 1980s, and coming from a royal house which was largely aligned against the homeland authorities, he emerged innocent of connections to the unpopular political and traditional leaders of the era. In a perspicacious publicity stunt designed to emphasise this dissociation, he funded the circulation of thousands of t-shirts with his image in the ANC colours of green, black and gold (Fokwang 2003). This political alignment has allowed Tshivhase to form alliances with potentially unsupportive politically active groups such as the civic associations. These had developed under the leadership of young males during the 1980s, largely as an alternative polity to apartheid sanctioned government and traditional authority (cf. Ferguson 2006: 104-5). As a widely recognized “comrade” with well publicised liberation credentials, Kennedy has thus been able to resolve local level disputes by bringing many

²² The *Makhadzi* of a royal family is the eldest paternal aunt to the king. She is the closest advisor and most trusted royal councillor. The *Makhadzi* plays a central role in any Venda royal council (see Stayt 1931: 167-171, 249-250). She not only chooses the mother of the next king (which is not simply a “hereditary” post), but has significant influence in ancestral worship rites and at all levels of the decision-making process.

of the civic structures in the region to the negotiating table with regional headmen and elected councillors.

One of his first actions as the newly installed *Khosi* was to reconfigure the Tshivhase Territorial Council (TTC), which he renamed the Tshivhase Territorial Authority (TTA). This was an apartheid-era construct based on a weekly meeting of headmen and chiefs at the royal headquarters in Mukombani. In Tshivhase's opinion, the TTC had grown weak in the twenty years or so since John Shavhani had been regent. He believed that it lacked influence or relevance, and had been all but reduced to a group of "yes men" through his uncle's nepotistic tendencies. Having to cope with the existence of a pre-existing faction that had opposed his original ascension and with many headmen and chiefs who had been brought into the fold under the old regime, Tshivhase's diplomatic skills were put to the test. A significant coalition was formed between these two groups that staunchly opposed Kennedy's return to power in fear of being removed from their comfortable positions of status within the council. However, in a move which mirrored Mphephu's earlier co-opting of the Tshivhase regent into the homeland government, Kennedy chose to keep any potential enemies close to him and did not remove any of his potentially rebellious opponents from their positions. Until the end of my fieldwork in 2005, this faction remained actively "anti-Kennedy" within his own Territorial Authority.

The new *Khosi* initiated a change of direction intended to transform the TTA into an effective and relevant institution through which democratic governance and municipal policy was to be mediated, and if necessary resisted, by the rural poor. Perhaps showing some bias, Fokwang argues that this has made the TTA a "shield against market forces, into which the local council desperately wants to draw [the rural poor]" (2003: 68).²³ This would appear to lend support to Koelble and Lipuma's argument. Indeed, the TTA, unlike neighbouring traditional authorities who have little influence over the civics, has used its political clout to successfully oppose several unpopular municipal policies such as a blanket charge for the collection of refuse and the drastic increase in the price of allocating plots of land. The new TTA abolished equally unpopular fees imposed under

²³ Fokwang conducted a brief spell of fieldwork in the Mukombani area for a dissertation on comparative structures of traditional leadership in South Africa and Cameroon. Whilst his work raises some interesting points, it presents what could be termed a Tshivhase-centric account of historical and contemporary processes. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, the micro-politics of conducting research in the Tshivhase region can be revealing, but the researcher must take care not to be seduced by the mythical heroic nationalism at the core of the polity.

the regent for access to services and resources such as burial in a public cemetery, the collection of firewood and development of small agricultural projects.

Significantly, in a move inspired by the new constitutional rights of women, Kennedy cancelled the rule under which women were permitted to apply for land only through a male relative, thus allowing all women to make applications on an equal basis. Although this caused major ripples of discontent among many prominent figures in the Tshivhase hierarchy, it has become an accepted procedural norm in the TTA, and Tshivhase gained some support from NGOs and local women's rights movements for it. Such a "progressive" stance by traditional leaders with regard to gender in the post-apartheid era has yet to be recognised by authors on the topic, who continue to exclude the Venda region from their analysis (cf. Beall *et al.* 2005; Beall 2005).

He has continued in this vein, becoming one of the most influential and dominant new political figures in the Limpopo province. As head of the Tshivhase Territorial Authority he also serves at the local level (Vhembe district) as chairperson of CONTRALESA (Council of Traditional Leaders). In 1995, he was officially elected into government as an ANC Member of Parliament and is currently provincial chairperson of roads and transport. He is provincial chairperson of the South African Charter of the African Renaissance, and has sat on several other boards and advisory panels at the national, provincial and local levels of government. Moreover, following many of his ANC colleges, his influence recently spread into the private sector when he was appointed as Executive Chairperson on the board of the hugely successful Soutpansberg Petroleum (SBP). During an interview in mid 2005, he told me that he hoped to become a South African ambassador to the United Nations – an ambition that he may yet fulfil.

Having established the dominance of the Mphephu royal house during the bantustan era and the post-apartheid emergence of Kennedy Tshivhase as the region's most powerful and influential traditional leader in the democratic dispensation, I now turn to an analysis of the ways in which recent national level government legislation to select a single paramount chief (*Khosikhulu*) has reignited local rivalries between the two royal houses that stretch back to pre-colonial times. This will allow me to look at the specific strategy adopted by Kennedy's TTA in this potentially epoch-making struggle for the consolidation

of power, and thus explain significant elements of the social and political context within which I conducted fieldwork.

Commissions, Kings and the Battle for *KhosiKhulu*

The issue of how to meaningfully incorporate structures of traditional leadership into a constitutional democracy has been a pressing and daunting one for the ANC-led government since the democratic elections in 1994. As the Venda example shows, pre-colonial cleavages of power had evolved between traditional leaders and apartheid era party politics which would clearly influence the turn of events in the new democratic dispensation. Although the process of drafting and implementing legislation has been slow, the formal debate was eventually initiated in 2000 with a discussion document and finally, in 2003, parliament adopted the *White Paper on Traditional Leadership and Governance* that was officially accepted by parliament as an act of legislation in the same year.

The White Paper covered a wide range of issues centred on the felt need to restore the integrity of institutions of traditional authority after apartheid. It marked a move away from the role of traditional leaders solely as "cultural guardians" of the rural poor, and provided wider scope for them to work (largely in an auxiliary capacity) within the democratic process. Problems such as the appointment and disqualification of traditional leaders, the role of "women" and "youth", party political affiliation, remuneration and relationships with other spheres of government were partially addressed, but much of this had already been settled in policy and legislation before 2003 (Oomen 2005: 55-6, 68-9). On the other hand, the White Paper was unclear on issues that urgently needed clarification such as the precise relationship between traditional authorities and elected municipal councils, the extent of jurisdiction with regards to customary law and the role of traditional leaders in the allocation of land. It did, however, offer some clarity by officially recognizing three levels of traditional authority in the descending hierarchy of "kings", "chiefs" (or alternatively "principal traditional leadership") and "headmen/women".

Although the white paper legitimised the existence of multiple chiefs and headmen/women under any king, it was clear that the government had the intention of

establishing one paramount king for each group with a history of traditional forms of leadership. The government resolved to “ensure that the legitimacy of those occupying positions within the institution of traditional leadership (was) beyond reproach” (Mbeki: 2003) and under point 4.10 of the white paper it was proposed that the resolution of any disputes should be negotiated through the implementation of a commission that would hear evidence from as far back as 1927 – the year that the Black Administrations Act began official regulation of traditional leadership structures and redefined in law the classification of African kings to chiefs. On the 16th of October, 2004, government minister Sydney Mufamadi announced the members of The Commission on Disputes and Claims, and encouraged all traditional leaders or communities with disagreements to refer them to the board (Mufamadi: 2004a). The Commission currently reports to the national ministry for provincial and local government and its findings, to be published in 2009, will be “final and binding on all the parties involved”.

The formal announcement in the White Paper that Venda would again have a *Khosikhulu* was not wholly unexpected. Nonetheless it caused anxiety and intrigue in the corridors and courts of traditional power, not least because of the attractive remuneration (according to the February 2005 government gazette a king should receive R45,3399 per annum) and as the title would be recognised throughout South Africa, the considerable social and political kudos at stake. A showdown duly ensued between the two main contenders for the title, Toni Peter Mphephu and Kennedy Midiyavhathu Tshivhase. As anthropologists of South Africa have long recognised, succession for kingship can be a messy business, often being essentially – at least before the results were fixed through ethnological enquiry – open-ended with flexible outcomes that depend largely on the extent of popular support and legitimacy (Schapera 1938; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; Comaroff 1974; Hammond-Tooke 1997). Even in the current political climate with well established genealogies, as one of Oomen’s informants has shown in the Bapedi case, “you can’t just claim paramountcy by pointing at history; you also need a following” (2005: 221). In this fashion, the battle for *Khosikhulu* is indeed a complex affair, hinging on attempts to secure legitimacy, and has not been without controversy and showmanship.

In the Limpopo Province the Ralushai Commission had been gathering data from 1996 to investigate “claims by certain traditional leaders that they were irregularly deposed or not

duly recognised by the previous government" (Mufamadi 2004b). The erratic methodology employed by the commissioners and the absence of terms of reference within which the data could be contextualised led, however, to general confusion as to what constituted "evidence" and who could submit it. The lengthy report of the Ralushai Commission was eventually submitted to the former Provincial Premier Ramathlodi in October 1998. However the findings were never published, reportedly due to fears that the recommended decisions on the 244 cases (many of which had little to do with homeland disputes) would lead to widespread confusion and demands that the government met the outlandish and unrealistic recommendations (Mufamadi 2004b).²⁴ Traditional leaders in Venda were forced to wait until the end of 2004 for the partial release of selected sections of the report in the Thohoyandou Parliamentary Chambers. Each applicant was given a copy of the section that outlined his claim or complaint, but they were disappointed when it became clear that the recommendations made by the commission were excluded from their dossiers (*Mirror* 17/12/04).

In 2004, as promised in the White Paper, the Commission on Disputes and Claims was established (Mufamadi 2004c). The Nhlapo Commission, as it has become known, embarked on a whirlwind tour of South Africa's former homelands and self governing territories during which claims to kingship were made in front of a select panel and through the submission of a document detailing the statements of the royal houses.²⁵ Two rounds of hearings were held in Venda during December 2005, during which submissions were made by representatives for the royal families of Tshivhase, Mphephu, Rambuda and Mphaphuli (see map 2). Although the latter two are significantly less senior in terms of established hierarchies of lineage, they were encouraged to stake their claims in light of the fact that genealogical superiority will only form part of the criteria for assessing the claims. Statements made by Commissioners to the press during the hearings were however suggestive of a certain lack of impartiality:

²⁴ Professor of Anthropology Victor Ralushai is a prominent public figure in Venda. He belongs to the Vhangona group and his ancestral connections led many to question his impartiality in the commission. Indeed Vhangona recently announced their own contender for the position of *Khosikhulu* in the guise of Chief Tshidziwelele. However, although the recommendations remain secret, it is widely believed thanks to gossip and press speculation that one of Ralushai's conclusions in his report was that *Khosikhulu* should go to Toni Mphephu on the basis that his lineage is descended of Thohoyandou's eldest son.

²⁵ The Commission for Disputes and Claims is comprised of 12 advocates, academics and politicians. It is chaired by the prominent lawyer and academic Professor Tandabantu Nhlapo.

[The Commission's administrator] declined to comment on the possibility of a referendum to resolve the leadership dispute [but] said that Mphephu was temporarily recognised by the apartheid government towards the end of its oppressive rule, but somehow this recognition lacked legitimacy among the Venda people (*Mirror* 16/12/05).

Nonetheless, once the documented evidence from prospective candidates has been assessed, the commission will publish its report and announce a final, legally binding verdict in 2009. It was against this background that a very personal and at times public rivalry between Toni Mphephu and Kennedy Tshivhase was played out "on the ground" during my fieldwork, which ended just 3 months before the Nhlapo Commission heard evidence in Venda.²⁶

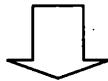
As outlined above, the royal house of Mphephu can rest assured that it *should* secure the paramountcy by virtue of the fact that its lineage, directly descended from Thohoyandou's *eldest* son, is the most senior. This was recognized by a majority of Venda chiefs in February 2003 at a meeting organized by the provincial Department for Local Government when the assembly of traditional leaders (opposed only by Tshivhase) voted that, by this right, Mphephu should be installed as *Khosikhulu*. Later that year, the 24 chiefs filed a case at the Thohoyandou High Court on behalf of Toni Mphephu, in which they asked the court to overrule the findings of the Mushasha Commission (see Figure 1), and Brigadier Ramushwana's 1991 abolition of the title, to re-declare Toni Mphephu as paramount chief.

In a bizarre decision, The High Court ruled that Ramushwana had acted *legally* in 1991 when he passed legislation that abolished the position of paramount chief, and they lost the case. It would thus seem that the national government has instigated a competition for what is effectively, according to the Thohoyandou High Court, an illegal category. Tshivhase later stated that, in his opinion, the meeting of traditional leaders had anyway been "illegal", and was reminiscent of apartheid era politics, when decision making was controlled by "people who want to feed their own stomachs" (*Mirror* 28.02.03).

²⁶ See www.emirror.co.za/archives/details.asp?StoNum=2296 for an example of how this public dispute has been reported in the local media.

Figure 1: Successive Commissions that have Shaped Traditional Leadership in Venda.

Mushasha Commission (Specific to Venda) 1991: Abolished the position of 'Khosikhulu' in Venda – approved and implemented by Brigadier Ramushwana's military regime towards the end of the homeland-era.



Ralushai Commission (Specific to Northern, later Limpopo, Province) 1996-1998: Established by Provincial Premier Ramathlodi to investigate irregularities during apartheid era influence in the institutions of traditional leadership in Limpopo.



Nhlapo Commission (National) 2004 - present: Established after the 2003 white paper on traditional leadership to gather evidence and make a final, legally binding verdict where disputes have developed over who will be 'paramount chief' – apparently oblivious to the Thohoyandou Court ruling that made this an illegal category. Decision to be announced no later than 2009.

Tshivhase's case, on the other hand, is bolstered by his recently achieved widespread power and influence with which he has attempted to promote popular support by engaging in an (unofficial) campaign for the consolidation of power. In the knowledge that well established pre-colonial genealogy firmly supports the interests of his closest rival, Tshivhase has attempted to influence the decision of the Nhlapo commissioners with a different strategy. This has principally involved attracting popular and political backing through his endorsement and promotion of the wider ANC agenda of development and the African renaissance in his area. At the same time, statements made to the press, such as "the Tshivhase are kings in our areas, and the Mphephu are kings in their areas" (Mirror 09/01/2006) have indicated that Kennedy, like the Thohoyandou High Court, is unsure as to the ultimate legitimacy of a paramount chief. Nonetheless, the Nhlapo commission in Venda heard that the Tshivhase lineage "have never and never could" be ruled by Mphephu, as it would symbolise a return to the oppression of the bantustan era (*ibid.*) and Tshivhase has repeatedly voiced his confidence that the ruling will be in his favour.

The wider significance of Kennedy Tshivhase's dramatic entrance to the ceremony in honour of his late grandfather can perhaps now be grasped; it represents his performance of legitimacy, simultaneously speaking to the kingship, the state and the citizenry (see

picture 2.1). To symbolically embody the spirit of Ratsimphi on horseback in front of leading ANC colleagues who will undoubtedly have influence in lobbying commissioners of the Nhlapo enquiry was clearly a well calculated, if opportunistic decision, executed to maximum effect in front of a capacity gathering in the spacious grounds of Mukombani. Moreover, the address was intended to drive a wedge between the traditional leaders (including those under the old Tshivhase order) who tarnished their reputations by collaborating for many years with the apartheid regime and those like himself who emerged from structures of the struggle with impeccable credentials, to protect and lead the rural poor into the democratic dispensation. Although the speech was drenched in populist rhetoric, it was also aimed at the ANC dignitaries, and the intention was obviously to leave them in no doubt that he should become *Khosikhulu* of Venda.

As he proceeded to outline in the address, Tshivhase's priorities in the run-up to the Nhlapo decision have consisted of three closely connected elements; the inauguration (*Vhuhosi*) of more headmen under the chiefs in his region, a dynamic engagement with the African renaissance and the promotion of development.

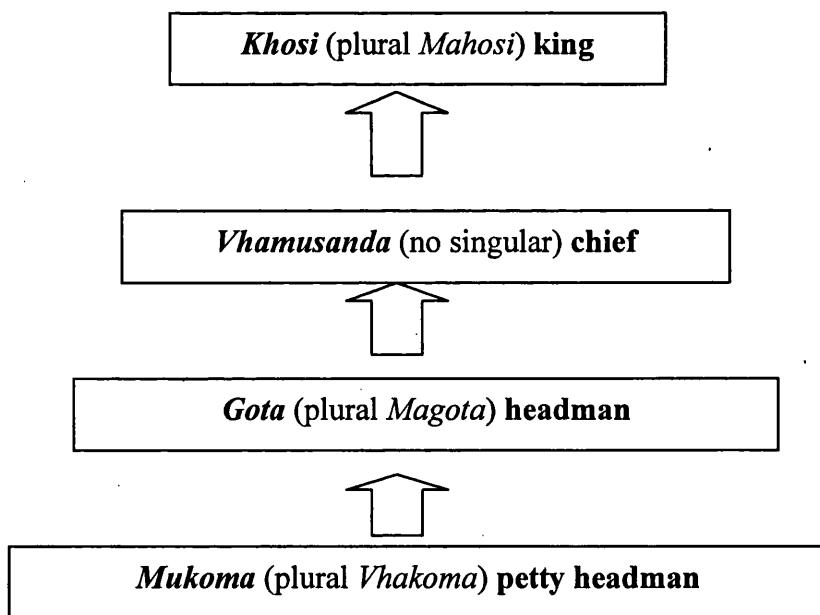
Tshivhase's Strategy for the Consolidation of Power

With the genealogical record going against him, Tshivhase has sought legitimacy in other quarters. There has been a significant increase in the inauguration (*Vhuhosi*) of headmen/women in the Tshivhase area since just before the official announcement that Venda would again be given a *Khosikhulu*. Although a minority of these, such at the *Vhuhosi* of *Vhamusanda Ratshitanga* at Ngulumbi in August 2005, have been conducted to install a single chief after the death of a predecessor, the majority have had a more strategic goal. This has often involved multiple installations, such as at Dopeni in 2003, when six petty head men/women (*Vhakoma*) were promoted to the position of *Gota* – headman/woman (plural. *Magota*; see fig. 2). Similarly, in July 2005 at *Ngwenani ya Themeli*, five headmen were installed (promoted from petty headman) in one lengthy session.

Most of the newly installed headmen previously held a position of responsibility in the hierarchy of traditional authority, and all of them belong to a royal family where they live.

At the time of their inauguration, they are allocated a location over which they will preside, a (male) “assistant” (*ndumi*) and a *Makhadzi*. Historically, the allocation of an assistant and a *Makhadzi* has been reserved for a newly installed chief (*Vhamusanda*), but significantly they have recently been allocated to headmen. The importance of this is to be found in the terms of legislation passed after the 2003 white paper wherein a *Gota* is officially recognized by the state as a legitimate office of traditional authority (as a Headman/woman), whereas *Mukoma* is not. In the context of the overwhelming support given by the majority of *Mahosi* to Mphephu, it has therefore been in Tshivhase’s direct interests to entrench as many headmen as possible under his authority. As a result, in the dossier presented by the Tshivhase house to the Nhlapo commission, the number of *Magota* and *Vhamusanda* under the TTA was stated as 76 – more than double that of Mphephu.

Figure 2: The Hierarchical Structure of a Venda Kingship²⁷



The official “party line”, however, is quite different. Members of the Tshivhase Territorial Authority (TTA) point out that, with a growing population in the former homeland, there is an urgent need to “restructure our systems of rural governance so that the people can be

²⁷ As I mentioned at the outset, there are 25 such tribal authorities structured in this manner in the Venda region. The arrows represent a strict flow of power, which must be followed if an issue is to be raised with the king. I documented numerous cases where people were fined for taking an issue directly to *Vhamusanda*, and expecting him to raise it with *Khosi*. As the diagram suggests, the positions are less frequent and more powerful as the arrows progress.

properly represented at all levels by committed, transparent traditional leaders." (Kennedy Interview [2] 2/07/05) This restructuring, however, has by no means translated into more accessible traditional authority for the rural poor. Rather, it has often resulted in chaotic reduplication of the simplest tasks. Moreover, jealousies and rivalry between the newly appointed leaders and the older, more established ones has in places developed into a scramble for jurisdiction and crumbs of power.

In such contestations over boundaries of authority, "the people" have often been forgotten. A good example of this is a recent attempt to build a community pre-school for children infected or affected by HIV/AIDS at Tshikombani (see map 4). Having applied in the appropriate manner via the *Mukoma*, permission to occupy and build was eventually granted from the TTA. After several weeks, however, the builders were instructed to halt proceedings as the building was illegal. The newly installed *Gota* had not been informed of the building, and had other plans for the plot of land. He took his complaint to the TTA, which upheld it and only allowed building to recommence months later, after the dispute had been settled and borders had been confirmed.

Nonetheless, in Tshivhase's wider strategy, *Vhuhosi* is as important for its symbolic value as it is for the numbers of officially recognised headmen it produces. It is a grand public spectacle with the obligatory long speeches, traditional dances, pomp and ceremony. The new headmen must crouch on a stage, hidden under a thick blanket and endure intense heat whilst the crowd gather (see pictures 2.5, 2.6). At the nine *Vhuhosi* I attended, an entourage of up to twenty luxury vehicles with armed guards in trench coats and shades heralded the arrival of the king and the opening of the ceremony. As he stepped out of the car, he was engulfed by a large and loud *Tshikona* group that escorted him regally to the throne upon which he presides over the occasion.²⁸

²⁸ *Tshikona* is the National Venda reed dance played by males of all ages. They are grouped by age and social status (royal/commoner) into cohorts, one for each note of the heptatonic scale upon which it is based. I learned to play *veve* – one of the smaller pipes towards the end of the phrase. The six reed pipes, *thakula*, *phala*, *dangwe*, *kholomo*, *veve*, *nzhingi* and blown continuously in descending order, punctuated by the leading Kudu horn – *phalaphala* – which starts and ends the phrase, followed directly again by *thakula* ("the lifter") that introduces a new melody. This is accompanied by an anti-clockwise progression of the dancers, who follow the steps of the leader (who can take the *Tshikona* in any direction). See Stayt (1931: 320-323) and listen to *Tshikona* on the CD appendix (track 1). See pictures 2.2, 2.3.

After several hours and numerous addresses, the king performs the main duty of the day – unveiling the new headmen by removing the blankets and announcing their names. They are then asked to state the identity of the assistant and *Makhadzi* which is done with much ululation and praise calling. *Tshikona* is again sounded, and only after the removal of the blankets will Kennedy lead the assembly of men in the dance, followed closely (in a strict hierarchy) by his royal council, the newly installed leaders and then male spectators of the general public. Thus *Vhuhosi* has been engineered so that the unveiling of the new headmen/women is eclipsed by the dramatic arrival of the king and his participation in leading the *Tshikona*. In this way, the extravagant opulence of the occasion becomes indicative of its contemporary political importance, and the performance of *Tshikona* at *Vhuhosi* can be read in both functional and symbolic terms.

Whilst the main attraction was centred on the royal tent, the king and the actual unveiling, there were distinct voices of descent to be heard around the periphery. Most conversations on the fringe of these events voiced a general discontent at the “donations” made by every homestead in the village to fund the event, and general acknowledgment of the bureaucratic confusion that was bound to ensue. This was reflected in an exchange I overheard between two elderly men at *Vhushosi*; “This isn’t right, you can’t just make a headman out of nothing – we have too many as it is” to which his friend replied “well, they say it’s a democracy now, so maybe we shouldn’t complain.” This was also true of the Luthuli award ceremony at Mukombani. Every household in Tshivhase was instructed to “donate” up to R20 for the provision of food, entertainment, accommodation, transport and ‘security’ for the dignitaries. This dissent was symptomatic of a frequently voiced opinion that Kennedy is in the process of accumulating a dubious and substantial personal wealth, but this seemed to reinforce deference towards him as often as it led to his being dismissed as a corrupt politician. Clearly, popular support in the citizenry is a key element to his strategy, but Tshivhase is engaged in a balancing act between this and the accumulation of statistics that are intended to evidence his legitimacy for the paramountcy in the eyes of the state.

It is this concern for legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, then, that has framed the post-apartheid concern with “development” in Venda. This has been formalised recently in the Tshivhase Development Trust (TDT), through which Kennedy has propagated and assimilated the popular ANC discourse within his borders. The TDT originated as a small

scale, but reasonably successful attempt at lobbying, raising and managing funds for community-based projects that were designed to provide employment, promote health and education, and develop agricultural initiatives. With Tshivhase's political clout behind it, however, the TDT has attracted attention and mushroomed into a healthy and prosperous organisation. It started with the small scale construction of several schools, a library and the provision of solar power in remote areas. The trust currently operates a large banana plantation to the east of Mukombani, and also has a large timber plantation.²⁹ Another opportunity for expansion was taken when the TDT inherited the land upon which two struggling tea estates were built in the 1970s. The recent closure of the estates, to which I return in Chapter 6, will without doubt send shock waves through the community. The TDT has, however, vowed to phase out the tea and maintain some employment opportunities by introducing a commercially viable macadamia nut farm.

The Trust has also sought to encourage tourism to the region. Most importantly, an overnight camp has been established on the nationally famous and internationally marketed "Ivory Trail" in close proximity to Mukombani. This is perhaps utilised more as a check point for off-road challenge races that periodically blast through the mountains and villages of central Venda, but it does attract occasional tourists who prefer to be "off the beaten track". The camp has been frequented by numerous film crews from Japan, Australia, UK's Lonely Planet, National Geographic and Londolozi. These crews come mostly in search of "authentic" *Domba* footage with which to contextualise documentaries or travel guides, and most of the chiefs in Tshivhase are more than happy to negotiate a deal with them (see picture 2.7; cf. Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994).³⁰

Indeed, as provincial chairperson of the South African Charter of the African renaissance, the inauguration of so many new headmen in the region has provided Tshivhase with an opportunity to promote the virtues of Venda culture (*mvelele*) and tradition (*sialala*). Although the 2003 white paper represented an attempt to create spaces for the wider participation of traditional leaders in the modern democratic dispensation, Tshivhase

²⁹ According to Fokwang (2003: 67) the TDT acquired land for the banana farm from the Mphephu-era Venda Development Corporation (VDC), but it is unclear what the VDC used the land for.

³⁰ During fieldwork I acted as a translator and guide for several of these film crews, mostly in the Tsianda region where a "genuine" *Domba* was taking place – although most of them would have been happy with actors going through the motions. Fees charged by chiefs for filming a *Domba* ranged from R3,000 to R15,000 (in 2005/6) which is a substantial sum of money for what was anyway the public session of the initiation which, theoretically, anyone can attend.

encourages his new traditional leaders to remain “guardians of culture”. The consistent rhetorical references made to the “importance of preserving our traditions” and “living the African renaissance, as the people can only make it happen when their leaders inspire them!” are generally reciprocated in the responses by the new *Magota*. Interestingly, and in support of Oomen’s position, much of the discourse of these exchanges is framed in rights based language, such as a new *Gota* at Ngwenani who asserted that:

[A]s it is my right to be crowned headman here, in my area, it is your right to dance *Tshikona*, to go to initiation schools, to enjoy Venda culture, to have a job, to water in your houses and to electricity... we will work together, as Vhavenda towards these goals. (*Vhuhosi* fieldnotes, Ngwenani 12/07/05)³¹

Tshivhase’s relationship with the African renaissance has not been restricted to a “reculturation” of newly installed headmen. Fokwang reports that his “preoccupation with socio-cultural activities” has led to the notion that Kennedy is a “champion of tradition” (2003: 77). Indeed, he has gone to substantial effort to involve young people in initiation schools and traditional dances such as *Tshikona* have been structured into regional league tables. The promotion of female initiation has been central to this process and it is in this context that Tshivhase has claimed regularly through the media that AIDS education has been incorporated into the ritual curriculum – an assertion to which I return in the following chapter.

It is this combination of Tshivhase’s active engagement with the ANC rhetoric of African renaissance and development against the background of impeccable liberation credentials that makes him confident that he, and not Toni Mphephu, will be installed as *Khosikhulu*. In this competition, however, Tshivhase lacks the backing of the majority of *Mahosi* in Venda, who, despite recent history, have little option but to defer to Mphephu as the widely acknowledged senior lineage of the Singo clan.

This contemporary struggle for the consolidation of power and the amalgamation of legitimacy in the eyes of the state, the kingship and the citizenry is fundamental for a nuanced understanding of much of the ethnographic data I present in subsequent chapters, and it has thus been given extensive attention here. The battle for *Khosikhulu*

³¹ The Tshivenda word for “rights” is *pfanelo* – also meaning duty or obligation. This term has been widely translated into discourses of ‘female empowerment’ so that posters can be seen to read “*pfanelo zwa vhfumakhadzi ndi pfanelo zwa vhathu vhote!*” (Women’s rights are everybody’s rights!)

in Venda, as I have shown above, has not only brought historical frictions to the fore, but has remoulded them in terms of the democratic dispensation. However, the unspoken decision taken at the level of national government not to have a referendum on the issue indicates that perhaps the final decision will be taken with more concern for political allegiance than for pre-colonial genealogical evidence or the opinion of the majority of traditional leaders – or indeed of ordinary people – in the area.

Conclusion

To round this chapter off, I would like to return to the arguments made by Koelble and Lipuma (2005) and Oomen (2005). To what extent does the Venda example support their explanations for a “comeback” of traditional authority in the post-apartheid era?

Koelble and Lipuma may well find data from the emergence of Kennedy Tshivhase to support their argument that traditional leaders function to provide the fulfilment of a “second promise”, delivering socially democratic objectives in rural areas. They might well be grateful for this, as they fail to produce much evidence in their own article. One of *Khosi Tshivhase*’s primary aims has been to implement development projects in rural areas; through the reconfiguration of the TTA he has also sought to bring a measure of social justice into the courts of traditional power. Indeed, he has successfully opposed several levies on services that are now provided by the Thulamela municipality. Moreover, he has raised the status of women and, although it is unclear exactly how many employment opportunities the TDT has created since its inception, there can be little doubt that through it, *Khosi Tshivhase* has produced concrete results where the government has achieved very little. It could be argued, then, that Tshivhase has at least attempted, to “remedy the injustices inherited from the past” (Koelble and Lipuma 2005: 77) and that had his actions been carried out directly by the state they would have had undesirable consequences for the Rand on the global financial market.

Similarly, Oomen might highlight the extent to which Tshivhase has embraced the African renaissance and the implications of this for the ways in which Tshivenda speaking people maintain the notion of culture as a means of engaging with forces of change in a “new world order” (2005: 6). She might point out that the TTA has become an effective sub-

national polity that has promoted a rights based approach to culture, especially through the recent increase in *Vhuhosi* ceremonies in which tradition is effectively “given” to new headmen/women as they are simultaneously charged with the responsibility of preserving and nurturing it. As Oomen is aware, the focus on abstract, invisible “global forces” such as that provided by Koelble and Lipuma is in danger of obfuscating the very real, local historical and political (dis)continuities through which traditional leaders have made their post-apartheid mark.³² In this sense, Oomen’s approach is exemplary in striking a balance between the unavoidable complexities of international pressures and the messy reality of historical and ethnographic detail.

We may pause, in conclusion, to consider the similarities and differences between the apartheid and the post-apartheid eras that the Venda example presents us with, and through which we have come to understand Tshivhase’s current position.

The similarities between the apartheid imposed Mphephu homeland administration and Kennedy Tshivhase in the democratic dispensation have been striking. Firstly, the position of dominance that Patrick Mphephu had in the official political sphere until his death in 1988 was absolute. He was Life President of the “independent” Venda and king of the most senior lineage of traditional leaders. Although Tshivhase has not (yet) achieved this level of command, he is without doubt the most dominant political figure in the area. As king of a powerful lineage with strong liberation credentials and a democratically elected MP with a provincial position, he enjoys, as Mphephu did, a “foot in both camps” of traditional and democratically elected influence. As we have seen, whilst the political and ideological intentions have diverged over time, the policy priorities of the two leaders have been very similar, facilitating the co-existence of two seemingly contradictory roles; development/modernisation and Venda culture/traditionalism in a quest to establish and maintain legitimacy with, and for “the people”, the state and the kingship.

And yet the differences between the two have been equally striking. Mphephu was imposed by the apartheid regime as part of a wider process of “retribalisation” that was

³² Arguing that the position of chiefs in KwaZulu Natal must also be seen as part of a longer history between the government and traditional leaders, Beall *et al.* take a similar stance. They argue, however, that the post-apartheid situation should be read through a “politics of compromise” (2005: 757) in which the electoral influence of traditional leaders was central to maintaining security in that region.

geared towards legitimising a policy of segregation and attempting to shield Africans from processes of modernity in their so called homelands. Whilst the majority of traditional leaders may not have supported his political alignment, they could not question the seniority of the Mphephu lineage or his authority as a paramount chief. Widespread resistance to homeland rule brought the institution of traditional leadership into disrepute and the Mphephu house has struggled to shake off the negative association in a province where the ANC consistently enjoys between 70%-90% of the vote (IEC 2007). Tshivhase has so far played this to his favour, and hopes to manipulate political opinion to influence the ultimate decision on *Khosikhulu* to his advantage, but despite his political connections he lacks the broad-based support of other *Mahosi* in the region and his attempts at securing legitimacy in the eyes of the state have threatened his popularity “on the ground”.

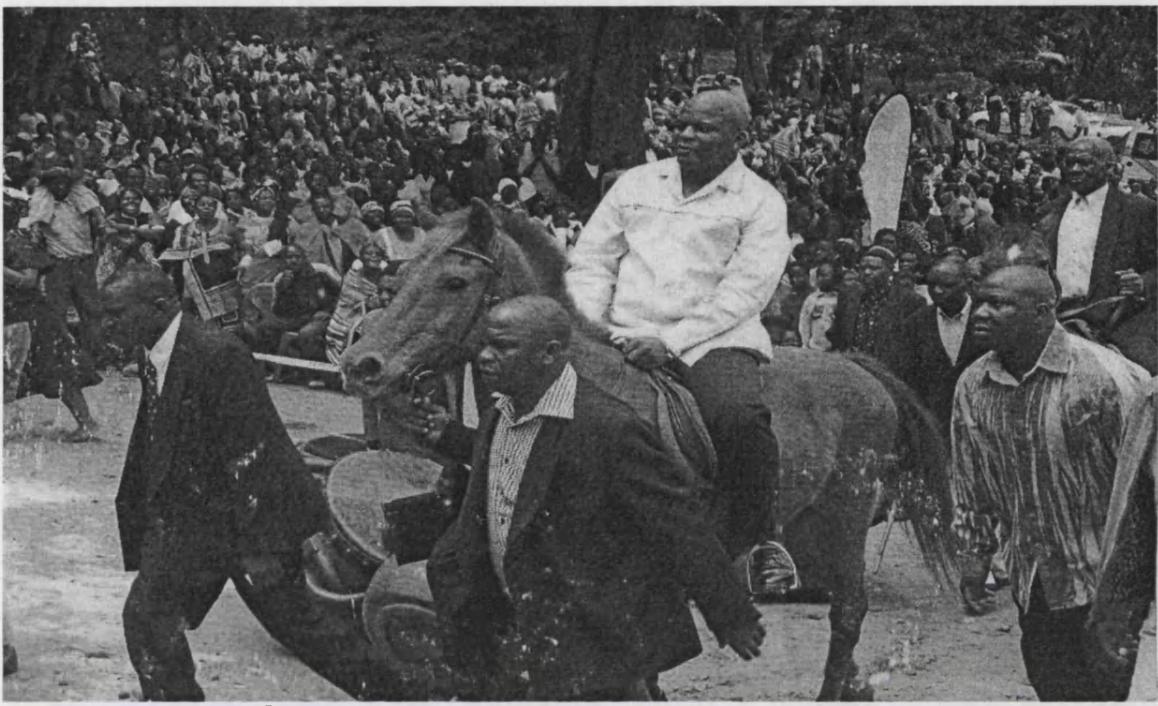
To explain the current situation of traditional leaders solely in terms of global forces, however justified, thus tends to underestimate the complexities of historical process at play through which local tensions have been exacerbated by the oscillating fortunes of rival, royal houses that have been at odds since the 1700s. In this way, such an approach underplays the agency of traditional leaders. It can not take into account the debts that were incurred during the struggle or the ways in which they are now being settled through performances of solidarity at public ceremonies and through parliamentary appointment. Although traditional leaders may well have a role to play in the implementation of “social justice” and development projects, it seems a gross simplification to reduce their role to an extension of state apparatus (which, it could be argued, they have been since 1927) in the shadow of the global financial market. Moreover, such an argument underplays the extensive role of NGOs in development work (cf. Ferguson 2006: 38) and the extent to which the post-apartheid state has, in fact, implemented policy in which “social justice” features significantly: the extensive selection of welfare grants for a wide range of people infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS is a case in point (cf. Nattrass 2007).

Moreover, the suggestion that the state and traditional authorities are “uncomfortable allies” (Koelble and Lipuma 2005: 92) is, in the case of Tshivhase, clearly not the case. Commentators should thus consider exerting more caution in their blanket use of the term chiefs. As I have demonstrated, we only need to scratch the surface to discover that the

political economy of traditional leadership can not be so easily summarised or made to fit into neat models that explain its contemporary existence. This, in turn, underscores a final point. Both Koelble and Lipuma, and Oomen, neglect a crucial historical dimension of their arguments by underplaying the extent to which the apartheid authorities were extremely successful in enforcing hegemonic constructs of culture and “tribe”. We should not forget that it is precisely because of “retribalisation” that “tribes” are around to be trendy, and culture exists as it does today in South Africa, to be cool (Oomen 2005: 4).

With such an intimate and recent local connection to the ways in which culture has been abused in South Africa, it is indeed appealing to invoke an abstract new world order through which to explain culture's contemporary comeback. However, to what extent can we argue that it is *experienced* any differently to how it was in the past? Is “culture”, in the context of the African renaissance, now empowering as a means of engaging with and actively constructing a new modernity – an “Afromodernity” – from previous abuses, and, if so, then for whom? In the next chapter I take up these questions with an ethnographic account of female initiation within Tshivhase's borders and an investigation into the claim that AIDS education has become a part of the ritual curriculum.

Chapter 2 Pictures



Picture 2.1: Kennedy Tshivhase on his horse, "Fly", riding into the arena at Mukombani to collect the Luthuli Award on behalf of his grandfather, Frans Ratsimphi Tshivhase.



Picture 2.2: Kennedy Tshivhase (in white shirt) leading the *Tshikona* dance at the Luthuli Award ceremony at Mukombani.



Picture 2.3: Kennedy Tshivhase leading the *Tshikona* at the opening of the Dopeni Project (Chapter 3).



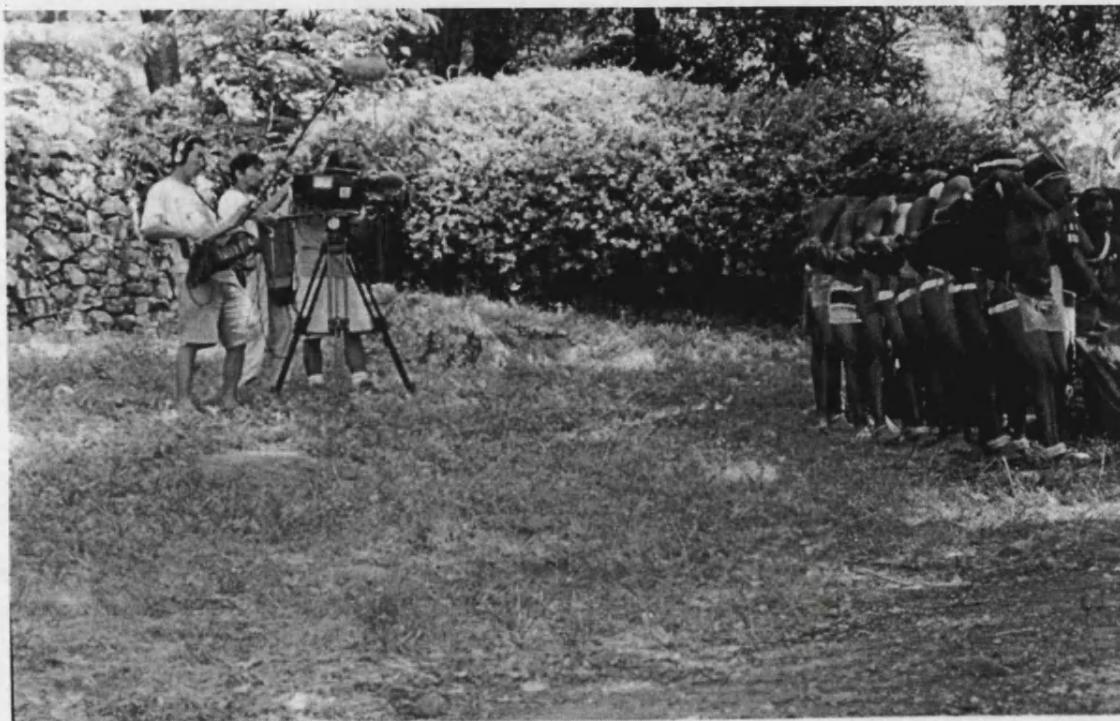
Picture 2.4: The crowd at the Mukombani Luthuli award ceremony.



Picture 2.5: *Vhuhosi* at Nengwenani ya Themeli, with the new headmen still under their blankets.



Picture 2.6: The new headmen are unveiled by a senior royal assistant and the *Makhadzi* of Mukombani.



Picture 2.7: A Japanese film-crew record initiates at Mukombani during a staging of the *Domba* "python dance" in 2003.

CHAPTER 3

Female Initiation, Authority and the Biomedical Model of HIV/AIDS

Ritual knowledge, unlike science, is antithetical to change. It is conceived of as the property of the ancestors, the founders of all social life. It must be handed on, not tested, altered, improved or even discarded. Since it supports experience and validates the seniority of elders, it is not surprising if they throw the weight of their secular powers behind it (La Fontaine 1985: 189).

In this chapter I develop the argument that state interference in the political economy of kingship has resulted in the promulgation of projects through which “tradition” is experiencing a revival in post-apartheid Venda. As the previous chapter demonstrated, this has emerged largely in the guise of King Kennedy Tshivhase’s engagement with the African renaissance as an important element in his strategic project to be crowned paramount chief. I will now address the ways in which this is connected to the recent increase in the frequency of the *Vhusha* female initiation ceremony, and analyse the dynamics of Tshivhase’s well publicised but unfounded assertions that ritual elders in his region have incorporated HIV/AIDS education into the processes of initiation.

This will reveal that although structures of chiefly power may have been bolstered by national government, they remain relatively powerless to penetrate and influence hierarchical structures upon which female initiation is based. At the initiations I attended, HIV/AIDS education did not feature in the curriculum, indeed as we shall see there was a violent reaction against its inclusion. The female ritual experts, however, were not engaging in any meaningful form of resistance against oppressive patriarchal or governmental discourses. Rather, I argue that they were acting in their own interests to entrench positions of privilege within the ritualised stratification of authority by protecting a monopoly on esoteric knowledge in which biomedical explanations of HIV/AIDS were interpreted as a threat to their established order. More than this, their actions were driven by a fundamental concern over the viability of social reproduction itself.³³

³³ Following La Fontaine, MG Smith, and others, I maintain a distinction between *power* – as coercive force whether as a result of physical, political or economic pressure, and *authority* – as the right to recognized command, legitimised by appeal to principals which are part of the moral order (La Fontaine 1985: 17).

Vhuhosi and the Promotion of Female Initiation

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the dramatic increase in the frequency of inauguration ceremonies (*Vhuhosi*) has been accompanied by a drive to encourage the new headmen/women (*Magota*) to promote culture in their areas. As it is considered inappropriate for a king to interfere directly with the internal affairs of *Magota*, this has largely been conducted indirectly through addresses made by Kennedy Tshivhase at inauguration ceremonies or other such public occasions. During these speeches, new leaders have been encouraged to endorse "Venda traditions" and to "preserve our custom (*u vhulunga mukhwa yashu*)". In this way, the newly installed leaders and their subjects were often informed by *Khosi* Tshivhase that "The people respect and honour a chief by dancing *Tshikona* for him and a chief returns that respect by leading ["being the head of"] the people's *Tshikona*" (Tshivhase notes Dec 2005. 120-23).

It is important to recognise in this statement, and countless others like it, how the performance of *Tshikona* is symbolically linked to (and represents) harmonious social relations between the ruler and the ruled. I have already shown that *Tshikona* is central to the *Vhuhosi* ceremony. Moreover, the extent to which it is understood to epitomise Blacking's famous connection between "humanly organised sound and soundly organised humanity" (1973: 3), at least for males, should not be underestimated. In this way, the significance of *Tshikona* in the post-apartheid era is inseparable from Tshivhase's attempted balancing act between legitimacy in the eyes of the state, structures of traditional power and the citizenry. "People enjoy dancing *Tshikona*" he once told me, "it makes them proud to be Vhavenda". This symbolism thus underscored the call for the revival of the national reed pipe dance. And yet, as Kruger (forthcoming) argues, *Tshikona* did not simply disappear during the bantustan era. It was, like other forms of communal performance in Venda, both appropriated by the authorities *and* used as a vehicle for the expression of discontent.³⁴

³⁴ At this juncture, I do not want to engage with the debate as to whether forms of musical expression reinforce hegemonic power or create spaces for resistance (Blacking 1973, 1985; Kruger 2001, 2006; Wulff 2006; Waterman 1990; Erlmann 1996; Coplan 1994). Clearly, there has been a move away from this dualistic concept and the performance of music and dance has a dual capacity to function as both (cf. James 1999, 2006). For example, the female *Tshigombela* and the male *Tshikona* both conform to and resist structural arrangements depending upon the context in which they are performed; by whom and for whom. This line of thought will be taken up in Chapter 5 with a focus on the music of HIV/AIDS peer group educators.

At the “cultural projects” initiated by Tshivhase to which I turn in this chapter, the perception was repeatedly voiced that the *authenticity* of culture had been in decline through the bantustan era. Clearly, in the absence of reliable historical records, it is difficult to assess the frequency and scale of regular events such as *Tshikona*, the female *Tshigombela*, *Vhusha* or *Domba* over long periods of time. Nonetheless there can be little doubt that they suffered to some extent from negative associations with the bantustan political authorities which attempted to manipulate the historic and symbolic significance of these events to create the illusion of popular support for the dominant political powers of the time (Blacking 1965: 37). Some categories of performance, however, such as *Mabepha* (sing. *Bepha*) musical expeditions between ruling homesteads seem to have become obsolete since Blacking recorded their initial demise in the late 1950s (Blacking 1962). The call to “preserve cultural activities” should thus be understood in terms of an ideological attempt to re-brand them, exorcise their associations with or memorialisation of apartheid and infuse the “time-past” with more positive associations of a democratic future.

Female initiation, during which adolescent girls ideally progress through the ceremonies of *Vhusha*, *Tshikanda* and then *Domba*, is central to this enterprise. Unlike the male circumcision rites of *Murundu*, female initiation is intrinsically linked to structures of traditional authority in Venda.³⁵ Ideally, the first girls’ initiation, *Vhusha*, is held at a headman’s kraal or a chief’s *Musanda*, following which *Domba* is held at *Musanda* or a king’s homestead. A king or a chief should host a *Domba* soon after inauguration and thereafter conduct the initiation every three to five years. A leader’s first *Domba* is known

³⁵ As Stayt (1931: 125-129) and Van Warmelo (1932: 125) have explained, male circumcision rites (*Murundu*) were introduced to Venda in the early 1800s by Lemba or Sotho groups – but female initiation is pre-Singo in origin. When the Singo migrated into Venda, they incorporated female initiation rites into their structures of government but as *Murundu* came much later from the south it remained on the periphery of power, being conducted mostly by Sotho doctors advertising their medicine or Lemba men who claim ancient Jewish ancestry to this day. As a result of this, in Tshivhase, men who are in line to the succession of royal power do not attend the circumcision lodge (for an historical account of this, see Kirkaldy 2006: 203-11). In the areas where I conducted fieldwork *Murundu* was run almost exclusively by Lemba men (*Vhashavhi*), and although fees were payable to the traditional leaders of the area and the first night after *Murundu* was spent at the royal kraal, it was, in comparison to female initiation, substantially more removed from traditional authority in terms of spatial location. Still, since the mid 1930’s government licences have been necessary to hold *Murundu*, and representative from the Department of Health and Welfare regularly inspect proceedings. The current drive to promote tradition has also seen a rise in the number of applications to hold *Murundu* (TTA Statistics). Although I never attended one, I conducted many informal interviews with friends who have attended, and who have facilitated, *Murundu*. The symbolic content is very similar to female initiation in terms of the emphasis on blood related taboos and ritual observance of abstinence during periods of pollution (*malofha mmbi* – “bad blood”). See Chapter 5.

as *Domba la tshifularo* (*Domba* of the first count) after which it is intended that he takes a bride from the graduates (Blacking 1969c: 149) and during which he should join in the famous “python dance” with other young men who are encouraged to attend the later stages of *Domba* and scout for potential wives (see pictures 3.1, 3.2).

Domba has a similar symbolic register for females as *Tshikona* has for males (Track 2 on the CD is a full digital rendition of the “Great *Domba* Song”, recorded at Tsianda in May 2005). Blacking has argued that the performance of some stages can be understood as symbolic re-enactments of successful social reproduction and sexual intercourse in which boundaries between ancestral spirits and human beings are blurred in the interests of maximising conditions for the promotion of fertility and the reproduction of “the Venda nation” (Blacking 1969d, 1985). This is not academic abstraction. Certain stages of the *Domba* are explained to the initiates explicitly in these terms, and the ritual objects worn by certain initiates transform them, periodically, into powerful female ancestors from their royal lineage (see picture 3.3). In this sense hosting a *Domba*, especially the inaugural *Domba la tshifularo*, goes beyond the instrumental demonstration of political power to the control and maintenance of a healthy cosmological order, without which conditions for social prosperity would be impossible.

Venda girls’ initiation is ideally experienced as a continuum, and a girl should only attend *Domba* once she has graduated from *Vhusha*.³⁶ To produce enough girls who are ready to dance *Domba* at a given time it is thus essential that *Vhusha* initiation ceremonies are conducted in the homesteads of *Magota*. Conversely, the more *Magota* are inclined to conduct *Vhusha*, the more pressure would be exerted to complete the process by later performing *Domba*. In this way, the increasing numbers of newly installed headmen/women in the Tshivhase region have given rise to an abrupt increase in the frequency of *Vhusha* initiation ceremonies in the area. As if to lead by example, to “set the ball rolling” in a confident assertion of his power, Kennedy Tshivhase hosted his

³⁶ Blacking (1969a: 13,18,fn10, 1969b: 72,82) provides examples of initiation being attended in alternative orders, largely for pragmatic considerations. In the discussion here I do not go into any detail about the brief intermediate stage, reported in previous accounts, known as *Tshikanda*. This has been subsumed into late stages of the *Vhusha* and early stages of the *Domba*, and its primary role of teaching the royal initiates the songs of the commoners’ *Vhusha* would appear to have been sidelined in the interests of efficiency (cf. Blacking 1969e). Similarly, I have chosen not to discuss *Musivheto*, a school run for girls between the ages of 7-11, mostly by Northern Sotho men, in which varying degrees of genital mutilation are reportedly practiced. It is not at all common for parents to send their children to *Musivheto* nor is it associated with traditional authority.

Domba la tshifularo at Mukombani in the summer holidays between 2001/2 in which over 2000 girls participated. In order to get so many initiates he effectively poached girls in various stages of *Vhusha* from traditional leaders in his area. Many girls who danced, reportedly, had never even been to *Vhusha*. A similarly flexible attitude to traditional expectations was evident when Tshivhase took this opportunity to state publicly that he would relinquish his right to choose a virgin bride from the graduates and to reiterate his assertion that AIDS education would be incorporated into the curriculum (cf. Fokwang 2003).

The leader (*Mme a Domba* lit. Mother of the *Domba*³⁷) of Tshivhase's *Domba la tshifularo* at Mukombani was Noriah Lowani Mbudziseni Ralinala, a highly respected traditional healer and ritual expert from the village of Dopeni (see Map 3). At that time, Noriah was also the *Makhadzi* to the king at Dopeni, *Khosi Khakhathi Silas Ralinala*. In 2003, Noriah's achievements as a ritual expert were recognized officially when she was installed as a headwoman at an inauguration ceremony along with five other relatives and given responsibility for a sub-division of the village. From this position of newly found influence, Noriah was encouraged by the Tshivhase royal council to form a centre for tradition (*sialala*) on a plot of land in her district of Dopeni. Funding was arranged through the National Arts Council, and the *Dopeni Vhulungani Sialala* (lit. "Dopeni preserve your traditions") was established in mid 2004. The Dopeni project is an example of how Tshivhase has sought to combine development with a cultural revival; dovetailing the simultaneous existence of modern and traditional in one enterprise. The aims of the project were threefold: to provide employment and income generation in the area, to promote cultural activities and, most importantly, to disseminate ritual knowledge amongst the newly inaugurated traditional leaders in the Tshivhase area.

Noriah's first objective was to write a booklet recording the details of female initiation, *thevhula* (rites of the ancestor cult performed annually by the royal clan on graves of their ancestors: see picture 3.10), *malombo* (possession/ "ngoma" rites), *luambo lwa Musanda* (the language of the royal homestead) and *mafarelwe a lushie* (the handling of a new born baby). This booklet was approved by a council of royal elders and is currently

³⁷ Paradoxically, the ritual name given to leader of the *Vhusha* – a position that is always occupied by a female, is *Nematei* where the *ne-* signifies male ownership. In contrast, the elderly male who presides over the hearth of every *Domba* is known ritually as *Vho Nyamugozwa* – where the *nya-* signifies female ownership.

circulated to every traditional leader under Tshivhase. For the official opening of the project, a small leaflet was produced to advertise the "courses" which were available:

Dopeni Vhulungani Sialala

<i>Vhulungu:</i>	R600	Bead making
<i>Mitshino ya sialala:</i>	R150	Traditional dances
<i>Vhusha / Domba:</i>	R300	Female initiation
<i>U gudisa mahosi milayo na luambo lwa musanda:</i>	R500	To teach laws and the royal Venda language to chiefs
<i>U gudisa vhatununi milayo na luambo lwa musanda:</i>	R500	To teach laws and the royal Venda Language to chiefs' wives
<i>U gudisa vhana milayo na luambo lwa musanda:</i>	R500.	To teach laws and the royal Venda language to royal children
<i>Zwidade:</i>	R100	Children's games, riddles, counting songs, fairy tales

The Dopeni Project

By the time of the official opening of the Dopeni project I had been spending three to four days a week there for some months. I was introduced to Noriah by Mr Fobbe, who explained to her that I was interested in *sialala* (tradition), and most of this time had been spent recording and translating her exhaustive repertoire of ritual knowledge, focussing on the rites of female initiation. Having read Blacking's extensive works on the subject, I was keen to record my own inventory of *Vhusha* and *Domba* songs, from which I hope to make a comparative ethnomusicological analysis in the future.

In the period leading up to the official opening, however, I abandoned my recordings and offered the use of my pick-up truck (*bakkie*) to assist in the transportation of tents, chairs, food, water, guests etc. Although exhausting at the time, this provided a means whereby the "social distance" between researcher and researched could be reduced by working

together towards the common goal. The secluded front cab of my truck became the venue for many informal interviews throughout my fieldwork. People seemed at ease talking, gossiping and joking with me in the relative privacy of the *bakkie*, where they knew others could not overhear them.

I arrived at 5.30am on the morning of the opening having left there at 2am the previous evening. King Kennedy had confirmed that he would attend, and so every traditional leader in the region was expected to follow suit. Noriah was keen to impress them and promote her business, whilst I was anxious to impress her and increase my chances of attending the *Vhusha* ceremony due to take place at the project in 2 months. I had been charged with the task of supplying the king's refreshments for the day (he requests Chivas Regal whisky, because the name has echoes of "Tshivhase") and I had been on a tour of Venda night spots to procure it, getting slightly distracted on the way. Several migrant workers had returned for the ceremony and had decimated the supplies of maize beer (*mahaphe*)³⁸ intended for the guests. Large, open tents had been erected dangerously close to the pit-latrine toilets and the speaker system I had acquired from a local musician had somehow been misplaced. I walked into the *Tshivhambo* ritual hut to greet Noriah, and found her hunched over a mound of smouldering *muti*, coughing profusely and praying loudly to her long line of *Vhadzimu* (ancestors) for a successful passage through the day. She had recognized the wail of my fan-belt in the cold of the morning, and so didn't have to look up to know who had entered. "Aaa, good morning Thitupulwi [my Venda name], don't worry, everything will be fine!" Unconvinced, I said a quick prayer of my own, and set about re-pitching the tents.

Miraculously, by the arrival of the first guests at 11am (only one hour late) everything was in order. Royal bodyguards had been loitering since around 9, and culinary representatives had been dispatched from Mukombani to monitor the preparation of food for any suspiciously poisonous activities. As was expected, they regularly asked the cooks to taste from the huge, bubbling pots of meat and porridge (*vhuswa*), and several young children volunteered themselves for the job – securing a hearty breakfast in the process. My last task was to collect a red carpet across which the entourage would walk

³⁸ *Mahape* is known as "traditional Venda beer", or *ha/wa*; made from fermented maize corn. It is brewed by many elderly women who sell it from their homestead – some of whom provide music and seating for customers. It varies greatly in quality and strength but is readily available and very cheap.

to enter the royal tent which, thankfully, given changeable weather conditions, was now up-wind from the toilet. The 300+ guests were entertained by performances which were intended to advertise the prowess of those involved with teaching traditional dances at the project. In between dances, long addresses were given by prominent local politicians, chiefs and traditional healers.

As Noriah's slot in the programme arrived, the crowd of onlookers and passers-by grew restless and were curious to witness the praise-calling (*tshikodo*) for which she is renowned and has won several prizes. She is a powerful woman, both in terms of social status and the formidable physical frame that she occupies. Dressed only from the waist in the colourful Venda women's cloth (*nwenda*, plural *minwenda*) and wrapped in the long red rope (*thahu*, worn by girls and women attending *Vhusha* or *Domba* and also worn to signify ritual impurity during menstruation), Noriah took the microphone and walked into the middle of the dancing arena, standing directly on the worn out spot upon which the main drum had been beaten for the dancers. She performed the recital as if her life depended on it. Sweating profusely and eventually in tears on her knees, she called out plethoric compliments for the long succession of chiefs and kings in the Tshivhase lineage from Thohoyandou up to the present day, pausing only to inhale deep wheezes before continuing the relentless praise.

The crowd seemed genuinely impressed, if slightly taken-aback, with her 15 minutes of flattery and as she came to a close, punching the earth so that it created a cloud of dust around her, we fell still and silent. With this as means of an introduction, King Kennedy arose to deliver his speech. Women bowed down to ululate and men crouched into the respectful *losha* position, mumbling his praises;

Thovhela Muhale!
Mbila u lume, phosho u wela vhathu
Khakha u mela

Thi ndi ndi a mila,
ndi kundwa nga shambo

Great God-like, invincible king!
My Highness, the mighty one
Forgive our interruption of your precious
time
Dense fillet of meat
swallowed without hindrance of bones

He opened the address with comments on various topics of the day, asserting that the current disputes over land claims were futile as all the soil belonged to him, moving on to champion the role of women and children in a democratic society. Many of the young

girls from the project were placed in front of the royal tent, dressed only in ritual aprons (*mashedo* sing. *shedo*)³⁹, with their arms crossed and heads respectfully bowed. He continued (in translation from the TshiVenda):

[Y]es, our traditions must be preserved, but this must be conducted in the correct/authentic way! These young girls should not be seen here, in public, wearing only *mashedo*. These things are secret, sacred/of the ancestors, and this project has been charged with preserving these things! Girls, get inside! We support *Dopeni Vhulungani Sialala* in the spirit of the African renaissance, so that our Venda traditions are not forgotten and our traditional leaders are well trained in their responsibilities...but our traditions and culture must not ignore problems of today...problems like unemployment, HIV/AIDS, which is why we have these things as a part of our initiations...so that our children can grow correctly/authentically whilst protecting themselves...They are the future!" (Tshivhase notes Jan.2006 23/25)

After this rebuttal, the young girls in *mashedo* who had been scheduled to close the ceremony with a brief performance of the *Domba* python dance were hastily bundled into the *Tshivhambo* hut and the award winning *Tshikona* group from Ha-Khakhu swarmed into action. In a symbolic stamp of approval on the opening of the project, Kennedy Tshivhase rose to lead the *Tshikona* dancers in his trademark, charismatic style, posing for photographs and video footage on the way (see picture 2.2). The opening – despite Kennedy's rebuke – had been a success and the dignitaries retired to eat at Noriah's elder sister's homestead.

Negotiating Access to the *Vhusha* Initiation

The decision granting my permission to enter the *Vhusha* was taken at two levels. Initially, King Tshivhase – although having studied some anthropology at The University of the North during the 1980s and being generally sympathetic to my project – was sceptical of my proposal to "sit in" on a *Vhusha*. I took the opportunity to raise the issue with him at Mr. Fobbe's daughter's christening, some weeks after the opening of the *Dopeni* project.

At the christening, *Khosi* Tshivhase sat at the head of the royal table, flanked by two armed body guards and his inner circle of councillors. After everyone had eaten, the usual long line of people who hoped for a word with the king took a seat and waited for

³⁹ *Shedo* is the small apron worn around the waist of an initiate during the *Vhusha* and *Domba*. It is usually made from the colourful *nwenda* cloth. See pictures 3.1, 3.2, 3.4.

the place next to them to become vacant. In this way, a brief conversation with him can be granted without going through the hierarchy of traditional leadership described in chapter 2, and the bodyguards maintained the circulation of hopefuls by limiting each conversation to no more than 10 minutes. I joined the table, and commented that the *malende* drum beat of our entertainment reminded me of a *Domba* recording that John Blacking had made in the 1960s. This sparked a lively discussion which had captivated the royal table by the time I rotated to a seat next to the *Khosi*. Two of the men at the table knew Blacking personally as young boys, and were keen to elaborate on the impact they had on his research in the area.

Indicating my desire to speak, I took up the *losha* position and the men at the table followed suit. As usual, Kennedy feigned to forget my name. After I had refreshed his memory, I was given an opportunity to speak. After lavish praise for his *Domba la tshifularo*, I explained my intention to interview a random selection of the *midabe* (graduates).⁴⁰ The royal table found this suggestion highly amusing and broke into a roar of laughter. Clearly this would be very difficult, the king explained, as it is taboo (*zwia ila*) for the graduates to discuss their experiences there. Wasn't I just looking for a wife, he joked, in which case he could make the necessary arrangements?! Mr. Fobbe then suggested that I should attend a ceremony to "witness the thriving culture of Tshivhase" first-hand. I had planted this idea with him beforehand, and he knew that a *Vhusha* was imminent at Dopeni. The table fell silent as the proposition was considered. "Do you know that we do AIDS education there?" the king asked, to which I shook my head "you western academics should enjoy that! It is not impossible [for you to attend], maybe Fobbe can take you to Mbudziseni (Norah) at Dopeni, but the final decision will be made by her, not me!"

Kennedy's decision to "send" me to *Vhusha* invoked the ethical conundrum of reciprocal manipulation that I discussed in the Introduction. To be sure, it was a tactical move which he hoped would facilitate the projection of his engagement with the African renaissance, through my coverage of the affair, to a wider audience. I, in turn, wanted to grasp a very rare opportunity for a male – a foreign, white male – to witness first hand Venda girls'

⁴⁰ In terms of the statistics course I had recently undertaken, if $n=100$ or more, then a random sample from this could facilitate statistical generalisation from a group to a population (in this case $n=2000$). I later abandoned this project.

initiation. I had little intention of assisting his case for the paramountcy, but was more interested in the micro-politics of the rites. We both understood this potentially mutually beneficial situation, although it was never acknowledged as such. Noriah, for her part, granted permission for her own specific reasons. After my assistance with the official opening and continued presence at the project, she held a meeting with the senior project members at which it was agreed that I would be permitted to attend the *Vhusha*. The conditions attached were that I would effectively sponsor it with some food for the initiates (*vhatei*), refreshments for the elders and a large tub of snuff for one old lady who was particularly opposed to my attendance.

Noriah was enthusiastic, and told me to come with cameras, videos, microphones etc. as though preparing for her moment of fame. For Noriah, to have *her Vhusha* recorded and documented would make a significant contribution to Venda heritage – an accompaniment to her widely circulated booklet and, as she told me; “to remember her legacy.” It was thus important that every detail was recorded accurately (hence I had to return several times over the next year), and she delegated a literate assistant to sit next to me and provide a running commentary during the ceremonies. A contract was drawn up in which I agreed not to share “the secrets of the *Tshivhambo*” with anyone who was not initiated, with the exception of my “research to be written in England”. As part of this contract, Noriah received a copy of my videos and photocopies of my notes – although the quality of the video turned out to be exceptionally poor.⁴¹

In this way, my attendance at the *Vhusha* was political for all involved and I was acutely aware of the endeavours to manipulate my presence there. Several women who turned up to participate were shocked to find a white man in the corner, preparing to record the proceedings on a video camera, asking questions and writing down secret, ritual knowledge into a note-book. Noriah appeased them by explaining that I was working *for* her, and pointed them to the refreshments which I had provided. I was invited to the ceremony four times, and on each occasion it was more or less the same.

⁴¹ The fire inside the *Tshivhambo* constantly drew the focus of the video from the initiates to the light of the flame. Thus the final product is visually, very poor. Nonetheless the microphone captured the sound, allowing me to transcribe the songs as they were performed. I also recorded the audio on a cassette recorder.

Having invested many hours hanging around the project and talking with Noriah, I was familiar with most of the initiates, their families and most of the initiated women. Nonetheless I may have influenced proceedings in subtle ways of which I am unaware and which I was thus powerless to change. For example, it is possible that Noriah omitted or modified certain elements of the *Vhusha* in my presence, and that the initiates and older women reacted differently in my absence. Similarly, having attended the ceremony and documented proceedings, I know that Noriah intentionally excluded much esoteric content from her booklet which could have been read by uninitiated women or men. For example pass words for entry into the *Tshivhambo*, ritual names for body parts and clothing, many proverbs and anecdotes told to the initiates during certain dances were omitted intentionally. However she chose to include the well known elements such as colour symbolism and the focus on “preparation for marriage”, with issues relating these to sexual health in terms of Venda aetiology (See below and Chapter 5). These things considered, I now turn to the ceremony.

The *Vhusha* Initiation: Contextual Background

Blacking (1969a) and Jeannerat (1997) have described the *ideal* sequence of events which lead up to a girl entering the *Vhusha*. Upon her first menstruation (*u vhonna nwedzi* – lit. to see the moon) a girl should inform her maternal aunt, who informs the headman. Once a small group of girls has been reported, the headman should then call in female ritual experts, who are not necessarily related to the royal family, to hold a *Vhusha*. The venue should be the homestead of the *Gota* (headman/woman), and whilst not engaged in the business of her initiation, a novice is a source of labour for the women who live there, although she must not leave the boundaries of the homestead. In addition, the stages, songs and dances that should be performed at *Vhusha* in ceremonies that could last up to a week have been documented extensively by Jeannerat (2003: 45-49); Stayt (1931: 106-110); Van Warmelo (1930: 37-52); Blacking (1969a, 1969b) and by Noriah herself in my field notes.

Given that historical variations can be influenced by regional differences and personal preferences, the specific order and detail of the ritual can take various forms (cf. Barth 2002). This was accepted by the ritual leaders at Dopeni, who told stories of certain ritual

experts who privileged specific elements of *Vhusha* over others without affecting its overall efficacy. Much literature on female initiation in southern Africa (Richards 1956: 55; Comaroff 1985; La Fontaine 1985; Rassing 1995; Turner 1967) has noted the adaptation of rites of passage to the time constraints of modern life: as their duration decreases their content is condensed. In Venda, in much the same way as boys' circumcision takes place during the winter school holidays, female initiation has been tailored to fit the school week. *Vhusha* at the Dopeni project thus took place over the course of a single weekend, from Friday afternoon until Sunday morning. It provided an abridged course in which the ritual leaders maximised efficiency by minimising the overlap between subjects taught and by stressing only what they asserted to be the core elements.

This condensed ritual format combined with the bureaucratic framing of the event to fit the National Arts Council's requirements and the list of other cultural activities from which initiation can be purchased give the post-apartheid *Vhusha* a distinctly "rationalised" feel. This was reinforced by the attempts at standardisation through Noriah's booklet, to which my video was to become an appendage. In this way, I was an active participant in the rationalisation of the ritual: a rationalisation intended to be yet further augmented through the use of information technology. Noriah had asked me to teach her to use a database through which she could document the number of "clients" that the project had "generated", using the computer café at Tshikombani (see Map 4). It was her intention, in storing data in this format, to give her future funding proposals the edge over any competitors; a more vivid image representing the modernity of tradition is surely hard to muster.

Overall, it became clear that *Vhusha* was a practice undergoing a particular kind of revival rather than one in which continuities were evident. It was, in 2004-5, by no means common practice for girls to attend *Vhusha*, and it would be misleading to suggest that a majority of parents send their daughters "to be sung for" (*u imbelwa*) at a leader's kraal. The recent drive to promote initiation is an attempt to reverse the falling off in attendance: a drive in which the political pressure on newly installed headmen to support their chief's *Domba la tshifularo* has played no small part. Kennedy Tshivhase's bid for influence, and his insistence in his headmen's loyalty and their ritual complicity has added a sense of urgency to the incorporation of young girls into *Vhusha*. At the same time, these

headmen have their own political and cultural reasons for enthusiastic participation in the project.

If young girls' attendance at *Vhusha* had waned over the past fifty years, the reasons for this lay less in their own or their parents' personal proclivities or dislikes and more in religious affiliation. As Jeannerat (1997: 100) has discussed, young girls' views often diverge from that of elder women on the merits of initiation. Many, she argues, refuse to attend, because they believe *Vhusha* to be "cruel and senseless", are opposed to the way in which it "invited them to engage in sexual relationships" and are convinced that it "does not help for their future" (*ibid.*). Whilst these quotes from young, uninitiated women shed light on some opinions held toward *Vhusha*, it would be mistaken to seek in these comments an explanation as to why such girls do not attend the initiation. The decision is taken not by the potential initiates, but by their parents, who will pay the initiation fees on behalf of their child – or make the promise to do so in the future. Whilst the resolution to send children to initiation may be influenced by the historical association of culture with bantustan authorities or notions of modern set against "time past", the crucial motivational factor in this decision is church affiliation which, by extension, is closely associated with social class.

From fieldwork conducted in the 1960s, we can ascertain that this has been the case for some time. Blacking (1964: 158) demonstrates that girls who attended the Lutheran church at that time had distinct, and distinctively privileged, life stories and life courses. A defining feature of a Christian girlhood or "background" as he calls it was non-attendance at female initiation or any other such traditional activities. Such "traditionalist" girls were subject to social stigma and dubbed "salempore girls" by their contemporaries who considered themselves modern in comparison.⁴² The stigma attached to "salempore girls" was exacerbated by the divisive spatial politics of Lutheran missionisation, which was characterised by the "insistence on their converts almost feudal subordination" (Delius 1983: 160-78; cf. James 1997; Comaroff 1985: 30 for alternative spatial dynamics of missionisation among Tswana; Meyer 1961 for an example of self-imposed geographical

⁴² Salempore is the material used to make the "traditional" Venda female dress *nwenda* (plural *minwenda*). It is also used by Shangaan women for a similar purpose. According to several tradesmen that I asked, it is of Indian origin, and its presence in Venda dates back to early Indian traders from roughly 1890. The same sources claimed that the standardised length and width of *minwenda* (that gave rise to the style of wrapping it around the waist several times to secure a fit) is the product of early tax regulations under which certain measurements were exempt from import duty (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). See picture 3.5.

separation among “red” [traditionalist] and “school” [Christian] Xhosa in an urban environment). Along with this spatial segregation of Lutheran converts that resulted in many of them moving to live in or around mission stations and symbolically distancing themselves from chiefs and other centres of traditional religion, there was a doctrinal concern that African Christians must abandon cultural practices. As such, Lutheran missionaries in Venda sought to convince converts that institutions such as initiation were “schools of the Devil” (Kirkaldy 2006: 213). Church affiliation, as I will argue in the next chapter, remains an important marker of identity, and the HIV/AIDS peer educators who are members of mission/mainline churches such as Lutheran or Methodist cited purely religious grounds for refusing to send their daughters to *Vhusha*.

Blacking’s main character in the biography of Dora, a Lutheran schoolgirl, reportedly associated the salemore girls with a backward and uncivilised lifestyle. It is unfortunate that Blacking chose not to balance his account with a parallel biography of a non-Lutheran Christian or a salemore child, as this would have provided us with a far more comprehensive historical picture from which we could have built an understanding of class formation from church affiliation in the Venda region. As in other regions of South Africa, membership of a mission/mainline church in Venda has generally been associated with the middle classes or the “petty-bourgeois” (Kiernan 1977). On the other hand, membership of the African Independent Churches (AIC) tends towards the poor and illiterate “peasant-proletariat” – with the massively popular Zion Christian Church (ZCC) appealing in particular to migrant labourers and female domestic workers (Comaroff 1985: 188-9; cf. Garner 1998).⁴³ As I discussed in the introduction and as I show in the next chapter, however, the post-apartheid era has seen changing dynamics of class in South Africa, and religious affiliation may not be as accurate an indicator as it has been previously.

⁴³ Of course, there are exceptions to these general trends. On a note of clarification, by mission/mainline churches I am referring to those with mainline orthodox theology and a history of missionisation. In South Africa this is Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran or Roman Catholic. Membership of this group constitutes just over 30% of the population. By African Independent Churches (AIC) I am referring to those churches that provide an “African articulation of Christian doctrine and symbol” such as the Zionist or Apostolic, which also make up just over 30% of the (black) population (Garner 2000). The ZCC is the most popular church in South Africa, with over 11.1% of the total population (US Government 2006). The “I” in AIC can also represent “initiated” or “indigenous” – but these refer to the same phenomenon.

Returning to the current argument, then, attendance of girls' initiation in contemporary Venda is decided largely along the fault-line of religious affiliation. Complicating this picture, and not mentioned in Blacking's publication of Dora's story, is the apparently contradictory phenomenon of believers'/Christian initiation schools. There are two categories of initiation that girls may attend in the post-apartheid dispensation; *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* (*Vhusha* of Believers/Christians) and *Vhusha ya Musanda* (*Vhusha* of the royal kraal).

The *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* is conducted regularly but exclusively by women's groups within the ZCC. As Comaroff (1985) has demonstrated among the Tshidi Rolong in the Mafeking region, Zionist churches are characterised by *bricolage*, and are capable of blending pre-colonial ritual systems and symbols with the lived experience of modern life (see also Rasing [1995] for a discussion of contemporary *Chisungu* female initiation among urban Zambian Roman Catholics). The *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* is an example of this hybridisation: the inclusion of pre-colonial elements in modern forms of religious practice. However, although we know from missionary records and early ethnological accounts based on oral history that the *Vhusha* was well established in Venda even before the Singo invasion, there is no reliable record that details the pre-colonial rites of the ritual from which we may make comparisons with the present day religious practice.

We can, however, make a more valid comparison between the two forms of *Vhusha* that exist in post-apartheid Venda. The ZCC is divided into two camps ("ya tshinon" – of the bird, and "ya naledz" – of the star), each of which are presided over by the two grandsons of the founder, Bishop Engenas Lekganyane. Both camps in Venda are known to practice female initiation that, to a large extent, is a direct re-enactment of *Vhusha ya Musanda*. There are three key differences: it is conducted on the premises where church meetings are held, the initiates are fully clothed in the process and some songs have been replaced by church hymns.

Hearsay confirms both the continuities and the differences between the form and content of the two rituals. Although, for reasons outlined in the introduction, I was unable to attend a Christian *Vhusha*, I did glean information from secondary sources which suggested that it thrived in the bantustan era when the "royal initiations" had become unpopular, and continues to thrive today. I conducted numerous semi-structured

interviews with women who participate regularly in Christian *Vhusha*. Initially, although I was very well acquainted with many of them, they refused even to discuss the matter with me. But when I demonstrated my own ritual knowledge, passed onto me from Noriah, they became more inclined to talk – possibly out of curiosity to discover how much I actually knew. Despite these differences, the corpus of ritual knowledge between the royal and church initiations appears to have remained almost identical, although several ritual objects are different and each stage opens and closes with a prayer. There seems to be a focus on black tea or *Trekker* coffee and condensed milk. They are used to represent the colours black and white in the construction of moral lessons (see below). I did not hear of any Christian substitute for the colour red; in line with *Vhusha ya Musanda* initiates are covered in red ochre and models of the human body are used with red clothes painted on. It is significant for my argument in subsequent chapters that Zionist churches in Venda incorporated and have retained female initiation. This is not least because of the vast numbers of girls who are initiated there and thus the many ritual experts who have a vested interest in the promotion of ritual knowledge and the understanding of sexual illnesses through Venda aetiology.

To add to the complexity, there is one further sub-division within the non-Christian *Vhusha*. This is between the *Vhusha ha vhasiwana* (for commoners) and *Vhusha ha vhakololo* (for royalty).⁴⁴ The following account is of *Vhusha ha vhasiwana* which was also attended by royal children, although commoners may not participate in the royal ceremony. The main difference between the two, according to Noriah, is that there is no singing at the royal initiation, and the esoteric codes are given in the royal language, *luambo lwa Musanda*.

In this wider context, then, King Kennedy's drive to promote female initiation has necessarily had a selective uptake, especially along the fault lines of church affiliation. Even at this relatively early stage of his campaign to become *Khosikhulu*, a tension has begun to develop between the desire of newly installed headmen for *Vhusha* initiates and the lack of parents willing to send their children to *Vhusha ya Musanda*. It is not at all clear what measures King Tshivhase can take to resolve this pending problem, or how this tension will play out in the future. Seen in terms of his on-going balancing act to

⁴⁴ The *ya* of *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* and *ha* of *Vhusha ha Vhasiwana* are Tshivenda for “of” and “for”.

achieve and maintain legitimacy, however, the actual numbers of initiates may not be of immediate importance; the public *promotion* of *Vhusha*, at least for Kennedy, brings him directly into line with African renaissance discourse and thus to the heart of current ANC concerns. Nonetheless he continues to promote training through new traditional leaders – creating an excess of ritual experts and a deficiency of potential initiates. Given the nature of ZCC affiliation, it seems highly unlikely that there will be a movement from the Christian *Vhusha* to support any African renaissance, indeed the *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* would appear to be as popular now as it has been historically.⁴⁵ As I will now describe, a secondary tension has developed that Tshivhase did not pre-empt. This is between the buttressing of ritual experts' authority through the official promotion of female initiation and the initiates' interpretation of illnesses through the biomedical model.

Ndayo, Sex Education and the Embodiment of Pain.

During the *Vhusha* initiation, initiates must memorise certain rules and laws (*milayo* singular: *mulayo*). Blacking (1969e: 21) defines *milayo* as "kinds of instruction...in particular [with] songs, dances, symbolic acts, and explanations of these." Van Warmelo (1989: 222) translates *milayo* as "a formulation of what is traditionally right...exhortation in support of traditional standards of behaviour...as taught in initiation rites." A significant proportion of these are embodied through the performance of physically demanding and painful *Ndayo* dances which are intended to stretch (*u vhamba*) the body. Although the pain is supposed to be excruciating, the girls may not express any indication that they are in discomfort (cf. La Fontaine 1985; Blacking 1969a, 1985; Wulff 2006). As we see below, many of these are designed to demonstrate and practice sexual positions in preparation for marriage (cf. Beidelman 1997:182; La Fontaine 1985: 116), and for this

⁴⁵ This is in direct contradiction to Buijs (2003) who states that "First missionary and later state education has meant the virtual end of female, if not yet male, initiation rites [in Venda by the late 1990s]." Whilst she was referring to *Vhusha ya Musanda*, her failure to include the female initiation rites of the ZCC into her analysis leaves it wanting. The current analysis has demonstrated that whilst the royal *Vhusha* lost popularity during apartheid, the Christian *Vhusha* seems to have flourished. My informants explained this explicitly in terms of the non-political stance taken by the ZCC during the bantustan era; as I was told during an interview: "I started with the ZCC because they didn't talk politics there...I could 'sing for' my daughter [have her initiated] there without worrying about these young boys [ANC youth league] that watched people going to the chief's kraal". This suggests that there was a movement from royal to Christian *Vhusha* under apartheid, and raises other issues – for a different discussion – about the role of the Zionist church in the practice of passive resistance.

reason they presented, at least for me when I was initially conceptualising my study, a potential opportunity for ritual leaders to include HIV/AIDS education in the ceremony.

At the Dopeni project, the progressive stages of *Ndayo* were performed throughout the course of Friday and Saturday nights, beginning at sundown and ending just before sunrise. All of the rites were performed inside the *Tshivhambo* hut around a blazing fire, and youngsters were employed to keep inquisitive passers-by on the move. Initiated women sat in an outer circle on the bench incorporated into the *Tshivhambo* wall, and the initiates occupied the space between them and the fire, with ritual experts moving between the two at will. The different *Ndayo* took between 30 minutes to an hour, after which the girls were covered with blankets and told to lie down silently, whilst the initiated women told stories, drank *mahaphe* beer and recounted memories of their initiations. The contrast between the intense levels of noise produced by the drums and singing of the *Ndayo* rites with the quiet and stillness of the breaks was of important symbolic value. The initiates were repeatedly told that they should “find comfort in the silence” (*hu na phumudzo nga fhumula*) and that this should stay with them throughout their married lives. In other words, re-interpreted from a post-feminist position, “accept your position and don’t complain about it”.

During the performance of *Ndayo* that I witnessed, Noriah specifically emphasized that I must “understand” a certain sequence that was performed at the end of the first night. This was usually between 2 and 3am, by which time smoke from the smouldering fire had reduced me to tears. The sequence took roughly one hour, and whilst it was accompanied by drumming, lyrics seemed only to be added sporadically by the initiated spectators – who were preoccupied with humiliating and insulting the initiates.

The first of these rites – a variation of what Blacking calls *Dzole* (1969a: 14) – started with an initiate putting a small bundle of hardened corn (*mavelle*) on the far side of the fire. One after the other, the initiates approached the corn on their knees with their joined hands pushed into the air behind their back. Bending down towards the corn, raising their arms higher behind them, they carefully caught one piece of corn in their lips. They then shuffled around the fire, with the corn as close to the ground as possible and deposited it in an empty broken pot (*kali*) at the other side of the fire until the original bundle was gone. Noriah shouted across the *Tshivhanbo*, “sa dzimmbwa!, sa dzimmbwa!” (like

dogs!) in case I hadn't made the association between this *Ndayo* and the embodied experience through which a wife should satisfy her husband.

As if to reinforce this, the second *Ndayo* in the sequence involved a specific drum (*murumba*) being placed onto the initiate's shoulders while she crouched on hands and knees. An initiated woman then leaned over onto the *murumba* and transferred all her weight to the small of the initiate's spine. Holding this position through support of other initiates, she slowly crawled backwards, clearly in great pain. In the third lesson, the initiates squatted in a row like frogs, keeping heads bowed, backs as straight as possible and their arms crossed in front of them. A thin, dry twig was then fed through their thighs by a ritual expert and the girls were "taught" to bounce in this one position on the balls of their feet, without losing balance or breaking the twig. Again, Noriah shouted at me across the fire, "You see, now they are learning to make it with the wife on top!"

Several initiates broke down in tears, being scorned after failing to perform these *Ndayo* adequately. When this happened, the "ritual mother" (see below) of the initiate would cover her with a blanket and comfort her in a dark corner whilst the initiated women howled with laughter and obscene taunts. Finally, Noriah "taught" the initiates a form of masturbation in what was known as "*bububa kha i gwanda mabvu*", the literal meaning of which is obscure with no direct translation to English, but has reference to the marking of a cow's hoof (*gwanda*) in the earth (*mabvu*). The *vhatei* lay face down, with their hands above their head. Whilst grinding their pelvis into the floor, an elderly initiated woman slowly walked over their buttocks. Noriah informed me that this "is for when the husband is away...like raiding a village for beer and cattle after it has been burnt down!" (In other words taking something, in this case pleasure, from nothing).⁴⁶ Although the performance of these *ndayo* dances seemingly presented the ritual experts with several opportunities to include AIDS prevention in the ritual curriculum, none of the chances were taken.

⁴⁶ This raises questions as to the extent of genital mutilation performed at the *Musivheto* ceremony in that it would seem pointless to perform such an act in the absence of a clitoris.

Ludodo and the Introduction of the Biomedical Model

There are wide discrepancies in the early ethnographic literature regarding the details and occurrence of stage known as *Ludodo*. Van Warmelo describes its performance every night at *Domba* whereby “there are no fixed formulae (*milayo*), anything may be said, the object being to accustom the young folk to the use of obscene language” (1932: 56). Writing in the same era, Stayt (1931: 113) suggests that it happened only on the second night as an inaugural stage of the *Domba* and is concerned only with the pragmatics (but not *milayo*) of pregnancy, marriage and childbirth. To add to the confusion, Blacking (1969b: 89) asserts that *Ludodo* was a *mulayo* performed at the end of *Domba*, which took the form of a structured story in which a young girl is impregnated and must reveal the father, thus the rite is referred to not as *Ludodo* but as “*muvhudziso*” (the interrogation). As discussed above, this suggests a regional and historical fluidity of initiation practices.

In Dopeni, as part of the rationalised initiation programme, *Ludodo* was the very last performative stage of the *Vhusha*. The initiates were ordered to sit down one behind the other, between the legs of the girl in front, grabbing her around the waist. To a medium tempo, they moved forwards collectively by rocking on either buttock. Like the *ndayo* outlined above, this caused the girls considerable physical discomfort and their struggle to achieve unison was mocked loudly by the elder women. Wulff (2006) following Blacking (1969e: 154) has suggested that this pain is intended to accompany “the interrogation” and embody the discomfort of childbirth in the initiates.

As the girls formed a line and were taught the movements, my commentator (who was clearly animated by the prospect of *Ludodo*) explained that “it [*Ludodo*] is for the *vhatei* to use sex words and insult people.” I could already hear this from Noriah, who towered above the line of girls, brandishing a *tshiombo* (large blunt drum stick) with intent. She was instructing them to verbally abuse each other with obscene words in short snaps, and demonstrated with some elders. For every two movements forward, they all sung “Eeee!,Eeee!” (counting 1,2) and for the next two beats (and progressions) one of them would continue the narrative, which was again punctuated with Eeee!, Eeee! and so on.

They progressed anti-clockwise around the *Tshivhambo* fire, and I sat in the outer circle. By this stage of the evening most of the initiated women and ritual experts were drunk and all were clearly enjoying themselves with yarns of their own expertise in certain *ndayo*, sexually explicit stories (some of which were clearly intended to tease me) and general laments for the "good old days". They variously insulted and humiliated the initiates at their leisure, scorning them for transgressions such as loss of posture, talking or daydreaming.

It took the *vhateli* about 30 minutes to master the harmonious progression of the melody in unison with the movement. It was a remarkable scene, with the initiates laughing nervously at the prospect of being explicitly rude in front of elders (many of whom were relatives), and the elders scorning them for the laughter, encouraging the insults. After some encouragement, the improvised narrative of sung speech began rather clumsily; lead by Fhatuwani who is a child of the royal kraal in Dopeni.

*Uyu hannengei,
u na tumbu.
Ndi mishumo ya Khotsi ya Mashudu,
ndi musidzana.
Khotsi yawe vho fa vhege e felaho
vhana vha huyu muvhundu,
vhakhotsi a vho vha do fa!*

That one over there,
she is pregnant.
It's the work of Mashudu's father,
the child is a girl.
The father died last week
and the children of this village,
their fathers will also die!

They continued after a brief pause, this time taken up by the initiate directly behind Fhatuwani, her school friend and neighbour;

*Fhatu o da Musanda
o vhulaya mmbwa.
O i wanaho vhabvanna.

U di ita vhutali.
Na vhabebi vhawo
vha zwi a tikedza!*

Fhatuwani went to Mukombani,
to poison the dogs there.
She got the poison from outsiders.
[Indians/Zimbabweans]
She thinks she is so clever.
Even her parents,
approved of it!

This round of *Ludodo* was met with loud ululation and laughter, and the initiates seemed encouraged by this response to their controversial improvisation. It would normally be unthinkable to accuse a neighbour of using poison at *Khosi Tshivhase*'s kraal in

Mukombani and the suggestion that Fhatuwani's mother (Noriah) was complicit in this made it all the more shocking.⁴⁷ They continued:

*Hula u dzula Phadzima,
o nyovhiwa nga kholomo,
na zwino o gonya muri!
U do bebwa hani?, lunwe!
A si na thaidzo,
a si tshifevhe?*

*Kei uyu, ndi cherry,
ya Vho Fraize!
U do takadza u tshi fhlulutshela,
shango ya vhakotshi.
U do kwasha maguvha, lunwe!
Hu pfi o abarelwe sa mukhuwa
Mpengo! O fhisesa malegere!*

That girl who lives at Phadzima,
she was fucked by a cow,
and is pregnant by it!
How will she give birth to it, so big?
She won't have a problem,
isn't it that she is just a slut?

Look at this one,
she is Fraser's girlfriend!
She wants to migrate,
to Scotland.
She would even leave her home.
They say she dresses like a European
Madness! Having sex for sweets!

The narrative developed along these lines for around half an hour, sometimes including references to my presence, and weaving between the topics of death, immoral sex, illness, witchcraft, pregnancy and poisonings. The initiates were clearly enjoying the moment, and the older women reciprocated the joviality. They had all taken a chance to lead the improvisation, and Fhatuwani, who had started it in a clumsy, off beat blunder, signalled her intention to have another try;

*No no vhuya na zwi pfa naa
Zwo ambiwaho nga ha
ula musidzana nga ha aidsie?
Ndi mudzia zwi tshele!
O da fhano nga vhege
U na aidsie!
Ri a divha uri o iwana hani,
hone, u do fa lini?*

Did you hear,
about the gossiping,
that young girl, gossiping about AIDS?
She is the worst gossip in Dopeni!
She was here just last week
She has AIDS!
We know how she got infected,
but when will she die? ⁴⁸

With this, Noriah slammed the *tshiombo* drum-stick into Fhatuwani's thigh and the back of her neck, scorning her loudly. I did not hear what was said, because Fhatuwani's scream and an old lady to my left shouting "who the hell sent her here?...control these royal daughters of yours!" drowned out Noriah's words. But the initiates were still going, and they continued:

⁴⁷ This is significant for the argument to be made in chapter 6. In response to the instruction to be rude and say things that would normally be prohibited, they instantly began improvising around the topic of death and poisonings.

⁴⁸ Again, in the context of chapter 6, note that talking about AIDS leads to the girl being infected with it.

*Ri songo la nga uralo!
A lifholi!
Ndi ARV fhedzi!
Ndi kwine u nitshireledza,
vhanwe vhatannga,
vha ri a huna aidsie,
Ri fanelu u condomize!
Shumisani Condomu Wee!*

We must not eat [have sex] like that!
There is no cure!
Just antiretroviral treatment!
It is better to protect yourselves,
from some young boys,
who say there is no AIDS.
But we know we must condomize!
Use Condoms!

With this second round any remaining joviality turned to open hostility and the *Ludodo* chain broke up completely as the girls were subjected to stick lashings and exceptionally harsh rebuttal from the elder women. I was unceremoniously elbowed out of the way by the furious elders beside me who croaked and heckled in a chorus of disapproval, "what is meant by this?...where is her elder sister? Sort this out!" One old woman grabbed my cassette recorder and threw it onto the ground. Noriah, conscious of the fact that I was (trying to) recording the incident, tried to rectify the situation by starting another round of narrative but her voice was drowned by the older women's protestations. I looked for the youngest ritual expert Francina, who I knew was an AIDS peer educator, but she had left the *Tshivhambo*. The initiates, like me, seemed to be genuinely confused by the controversy they had caused. It was the end of the second night and they were exhausted. A few were in tears after being beaten, and they all huddled in a corner covering themselves with blankets as the assembly of women dispersed into the night, kicking and spitting on the *vhatei* as they walked past them, shouting loudly about returning at dawn for the final stage at the river.

It was 3.30am, and I remained seated on the ground in the now eerily silent and dusty *Tshivhambo*, the only noise coming from the crackling of the fire and the whimpering, weeping initiates. I was writing notes frantically and checking my video recorder with the light of the flames, when Noriah joined me. "Did you get everything?" We watched a few minutes of the *Ludodo* through my camera, and she walked with me to my bakkie. "Don't worry" she said, "you will come back and see it done properly next time".

Ritual Stratification and Authority

The drama outlined above occurred at my second visit to *Vhusha*, and there was no subsequent mention of AIDS in either of the following two I attended. The embodiment of disciplined sexual technique in *ndayo* presented, at least for me, a potential point at which AIDS education might have been strategically introduced into the initiation. In hindsight, this opportunity arose on several different occasions during "lessons" in which red, white and black are used to convey an aetiology of sexual health based on the build up and removal of pollution and blood related taboos (see below). Although Kennedy Tshivhase had stated publicly many times that "his" female initiations incorporated AIDS education, however, the ritual elders at Dopeni continued to omit it from the curriculum. Why, then, when it *did* appear, couched in biomedical discourse by the initiates, was it extinguished forcefully through ritual beatings and severe verbal abuse?

To answer this question, I must look in closer detail at the role of ritual knowledge and experience in the construction of the hierarchy upon which *Vhusha* is based, and the role of esoteric *milayo* (rules/laws) that are integral to this (cf. Blacking 1969b; Jeannerat 1997).

At the Dopeni project, the ritual experts are a tight-knit group of between 8-10 matrons and elderly women. All have royal connections and profess to be adherents of ancestral religion rather than Christianity. Some of them are related to Noriah, like her daughter, Francina, who is the youngest expert at 35, and a long-standing acquaintance of mine from the HIV/AIDS peer education project which operates in and around the village (see Chapter 4). There was a clear-cut distinction between this group and those at the next level of the hierarchy: the ordinary initiated women of all ages and social categories who came and went during the course of the ceremonies depending on who was being initiated and on other commitments such as funerals or domestic chores. Despite this clear hierarchy of command, both ritual experts and the rank-and-file initiates took part in debates over the form, content and sequence of various rites. Moreover, authority within the ranks of the latter group was strictly prescribed by age (more precisely, by when they danced *Domba*), and older non-experts were deferentially offered *mahaphe* before the younger experts in recognition of this status.

The initiates (*vhatei*) at the ceremonies I attended were a combination of royal and common children from Dopeni and the surrounding villages of Shanza, Tshikombani, Tshivhilidulu or Tshirenzeni.⁴⁹ They had all been sent their by their families, but only a handful had managed to pay the fee of between R250 and R300 (in 2004/5). Some parents could not afford the minimum deposit of R50, and so committed their daughters to settle the debt through labour in the headwoman's orchard. Others, who had the cash, refused to pay it all on the grounds that it was vastly over-priced and they seemed to be in continuous negotiation with Noriah over this issue. Indeed, the "steering committee" of the Dopeni Project agreed to cut the price of initiation to R100, but this was scrapped when those who had already paid began to demand their money back. It is expected that some payment should be made for *Vhusha*, but the suspicion that Kennedy is amassing a dubious fortune has tainted the project; people gossip that the exorbitant fees go into the king's pocket, and that government subsidy funds have been "eaten" by those running the project.

Independent of payment politics – which were restricted to adult conversation – small groups of between three to five initiates were going through different stages of the initiation simultaneously. As we see in figure 3.1, *Vhusha* incorporates girls at three stages of the initiation process, all of whom are stratified with different ranks performing specific duties. Contra-Turner, this phase of liminality is not characterised by *communitas*, indeed throughout *Vhusha* and *Domba* the explicit stratification of initiates is integral to the ritual process. For this reason, *Vhusha* is usually performed by each initiate three times. In the 1960s initiates often waited months between the stages (Blacking 1969a: 8), but in Dopeni in 2005, this happened on successive days over the course of the weekend.

The first stage *muhulu*, (*lit.* the growing person) involves ritual beating, nakedness, shaving of hair, being covered in red ochre, poor food, taunting and the strict observation of taboos such as avoidance of washing, salt (white) and men. A girl's second attendance, *u lata matavha*, (to wash away the dirt) at which she is referred to as *pfunzi*

⁴⁹ At one ceremony, the single *mutei* was a grown woman who had come from Pretoria after a consultation with an *inyanga* revealed to her that the source of her bad luck was that she had not "been sung for" as a child. Unfortunate she had to return to the city before I could interview her.

(teacher) brings a gradual release of taboos and a responsibility to prepare food for first timers. Girls at this stage help with the ritual instruction of first-timers, but remain under the authority of girls attending for their third and last time as initiates who are reckoned as undergoing the final phase of *tshikhwakhwatho* (the finishing). These girls, on their last visit, are known as *midabe* (sing: *mudabe*). It is intended that they become involved in fictitious kinship by taking a "ritual child" from the incoming group to whom they provide comfort and assurance during stage one. According to Blacking (1959, 1969a: 5) this relationship should endure into adulthood, but *midabe* to whom I spoke cast some doubt on this.

As La Fontaine has argued:

The legitimacy conferred on ritual officiates is that of traditional knowledge: the information, understanding and experience needed to ensure the correct performance. The ritual...contrives to demonstrate the effectiveness of their knowledge and confirm their authority as legitimate (1985:17).

Bearing this in mind, recent attempts to understand initiation through the role of "collective memory", formed when a group undergo painful experiences (Beidelman 1997; Reily 1998; which is to a large extent based on Blacking 1985: 86-87) seem to have forgotten that female initiation is as much "for" the initiated as it is "for" the initiates. In this way, the *milayo*, gradually revealed, serve not only to facilitate the initiates' progression into adulthood through their acquisition of knowledge and secrets, but equally importantly to uphold and bolster the authority of the elders and the initiated (and by extension, of the ancestors) in the context of ritual performance (cf. Bloch 1974, 1992).

Theoretically, all women who have been through *Vhusha* are members and can enter the *Tshivhambo* at any stage, share the traditional beer and join in the coaching and mocking of the initiates. Evidence that someone "has been sung for" comes in the form of knowing the esoteric code learned at *Vhusha*, in which objects from the *Tshivhambo* hut, wild animals and the natural world are associated with human body parts at various stages of sexual intercourse, pregnancy, birth, health and sickness. For example, if an initiate is told "the door is just open, you can see the light peeking through", she must answer "A woman who can not have intercourse soon after giving birth." The poles in the roof, the small window frame, the ashes of the fire, the seeds from the grass etc are all coded in

this way into a complex secret language that permits or restricts access to the initiation. These laws are not only presented to the initiates through *ndayo*, but in a variety of song words, poems, riddles and counting games. Moreover, a variety of ritual objects such as clay models of people, huts and wild animals are used as didactic aids (cf. Nettleton 1992). Although *milayo* often have no obvious meaning for the initiates, a significant proportion constitute what might loosely be called a "moral code" that outlines ideal female behaviour (c.f. Beidelman 1997: xiii). These reflect conservative patriarchal values such as virginity at marriage, obedience and endurance.

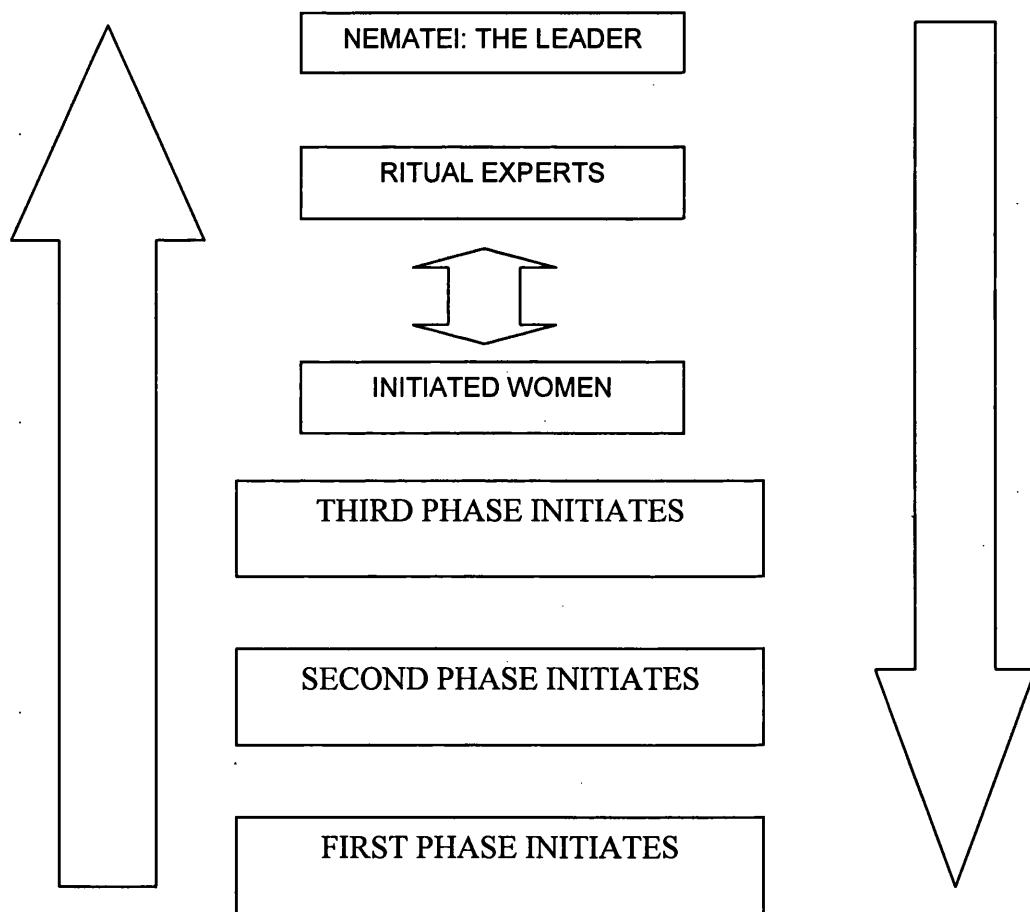


Figure 3.1: The Hierarchy of Authority in *Vhusha*. The arrow on the left represents the direction of deference and the accumulation of experience, whilst the arrow on the right represents the flow of esoteric knowledge and authority in the *Tshivhambo* ritual hut. The arrow in the middle represents the blurred boundary between knowledge and experience between experts and the rank-and-file initiated women who often debated the exact form, content or sequence of the rites.

Ritual Knowledge and Experience

A central theme running through many *milayo*, fundamental to *Vhusha*, is the promotion of sexual health and fertility, mostly through symbolic associations made between the colours red (menstrual blood/pollution/danger), white (semen/purity/milk/safety/life) and black (menopause/ashes/death) (cf. Turner 1967, 1969a for Ndembu; Blacking 1969c: 158 for Venda). The clay sculptures mentioned above are always painted in these colours, as are the beads used for other rites and the dried corn used in the *ndayo* (see pictures 3.8, 3.9). These are woven into many complex and often abstract narratives about people and animals (and creatures that are a combination of the two) that have breached blood related taboos and subsequently experience problems with sexual health through a build up of pollution, ending with a loss of fertility. This is encapsulated symbolically in the timing of the *Vhusha* (immanently after the first menses) and the changing terminology of the noun used to refer to girls who are "sung for". They are transformed from being *musidzana* (little girl) to *khomba* (dangerous girl). The danger is inherent in her potential to get pregnant, and thus the potential to become polluted if the menstrual blood is not regularly managed in a hygienic manner by thorough washing of the body and the use of disposable cloths or rags as tampons (*miserwa* sing. *muserwa*).

This is enacted by the first stage initiates every morning during *Vhusha*, when they are ceremonially immersed to the waist in the river (*u kamisa*) by elder girls and the ritual experts whilst singing the song of the second stage *u lata matavha* (to wash away the dirt). The "dirt" in this sense is not only the red ochre that has been smeared all over the initiates the night before, but also the menstrual blood (of which the ochre is a symbol) that the initiate has been producing for this first time in her life. At Dopeni, this happened on the Saturday and Sunday mornings. On the Saturday the initiates were immersed for up to 4 hours, whilst on the Sunday they were treated less harshly. The water, early in the morning, was very cold, and they were clearly being made to endure this pain as the symbolic embodiment of the importance of washing thoroughly whilst menstruating.

Early accounts of female initiation, perhaps restricted by prudish conventions of the time, reported this in more nebulous terms. Stayt thus explains that:

A menstruating woman...was always strictly taboo...[during *Vhusha*] a great deal of time is given up to sexual teaching...[T]hey are taught that...marriage is not a game but the precursor of child birth, and, as such, must be properly understood, so that the resultant children will be strong and healthy, uncontaminated by dangers and diseases resulting from improper knowledge and broken taboos (1931: 110-113).

Similarly, Van Warmelo (1932: 45) writes about “the soaking” of initiates during *Vhusha*. Van Warmelo published his accounts of Venda ritual with the full text in Tshivenda as provided by the ritual experts. In this account, we read that the initiate “*u ya u tambiswa...A tshi vho ya lwa vhuvhili vha ri* “O *lata matavha, o ima*”. Van Warmelo translates this as “A girl goes to the water to be soaked...when she goes for the second time...they say that she has cast midday from her, she has got up.” However, in the context of the Tshivenda narrative this could more accurately be translated as “A girl goes to the water to be cleansed/purified by the removal of menstrual blood (*u tampa* – to wash, *u tambiswa* – to be cleansed of). When she goes for the second time they say “the pollution has been removed (*o lata matavha*), it has stopped (*o ima*).”⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that Van Warmelo was in any way ignorant of the actual meaning here (given that his ability to converse in Tshivenda was legendary), but rather that, as a conservative, Christian commentator of the time, he would have been uncomfortable publishing the intimate details of Venda girls’ menstrual ablutions. Nonetheless, such menstrual ablutions are key to understanding this aspect of *Vhusha*, and the removal of menstrual blood from the female body is fundamental to Venda aetiology of sexual health through which HIV/AIDS has been widely interpreted.

Blacking’s accounts of female initiation, on the other hand, are less coy. In his agglomeration of *Vhusha* songs, he relates a rendition that “refer[s] to the onset of a girl’s menses”:

⁵⁰ Van Warmelo’s translation is fascinating in that it plays on the ambiguity of a Tshivenda term for a woman’s period. The next phrase in Tshivenda account is given as “*Ha tsha do duvha a dzhena madini*” which he translates as “she does not go into the water again”, and which he incorporates into the previous explanation that “she has cast midday from her”. However this phrase could more adequately be translated in this context as “if she is not bleeding, she does not enter the water”. A woman’s period is often referred to as “*o vhonna maduvha*” (she has seen the days) but *duvha* also translates directly as “day” or “the sun”. Also “*ima*” translates directly as “stand up” or “come to a halt”. He thus maintains a degree of linguistic integrity by translating literally what was clearly intended in a figurative, metaphorical sense. I must credit Noriah (who found Van Warmelo’s sanitised version highly amusing) with noticing this transgression. She suggested that it was possibly narrated to him in these terms as there were uninitiated women present at the time, or that the narrator did not want to divulge the “whole story” to him in the interests of preserving ritual knowledge.

Wele Wele phosho vhasidzana!
Wele wele phoso ndi ya'ni?
Hu na dinnyo lo mpha vhuyada.
(Blacking 1969a: 21)

What a noise there is, girls!
What is causing all this noise?
My monstrous fanny has given me filth.

The theme of pollution is extended in other songs, in which notions of morality and respect for conservative norms, namely fidelity and deference, are counterposed against the dangers of pollution. During the first stage of a *Domba* at Tsianda Village in April, 2004, the ritual mother (*Mme a Domba*) decided to recap the central themes the girls "learned" in *Vhusha*. This covered three thematic areas of respect (*u hulisa*), work (*u shuma*), and health (*mutakalo*). Each was given a resume by means of a riddle, a narrative with clay figures, and a song. Regarding health, the narrative told of "Nya Vhasedza", a woman whose husband passed her a sexually transmitted illness after he slept with a *tshifhefhe* (beer hall prostitute) because his wife did not care for him adequately. She was only cured after an auntie travelled to Ha-Makuya to collect the correct *mushonga* (medicine). The song that was sung to reinforce this, as you can hear on the CD appendix (track 3), summarised the story as follows;

Nya Vhasedza u a lwalwa, u na thusula.
O ya wana ha munna wawe.
Vha Muisa o lipini ha Makuya
Vha do vhuya vha thusula ya fhela

Vhasedza's mother is sick with syphilis.
She got it from her husband.
The Muisa family went to the place at
Makuya,
they will return and finish the syphilis⁵¹

Venda aetiology of sexual health, then, is enshrined in female initiation. It is centred on notions of blood, and is achieved through the cleansing and purging of pollution. This is also central to male circumcision rites, and it forms the basis upon which traditional healers such as Noriah diagnose and treat problems of a sexual nature. This aetiology constitutes the building blocks for the "folk model" of illness representation (Good 1994: 37; Liddell *et al.* 2005) through which HIV/AIDS has been interpreted by many men and older (initiated) women in rural Venda to which I return in chapters 5 and 6.

⁵¹Ha-Makuya is a remote region of Venda, in the extreme north east corner on the border with the Kruger National Park and Zimbabwe (see Map 2). It is a very dry area, and trees that grow there are believed yield concentrated bark and roots, and are thus associated with powerful herbal medicines. It is also mentioned in Solomon Mathase's *Zwidwumbe* in his search for a traditional cure for AIDS (see Chapter 5, Appendix C, line 51).

Returning to the current analysis, then, the subject matter and colloquialism employed in the improvised construction of the narratives in *Ludodo* was in line with instruction, obscene, offensive, personal and antithetical to conventional conversation. The breaching of strict taboos with reference to adultery, bestiality, witchcraft, death, illness and accusations clearly placed the initiates in an awkward position, but this was encouraged by the elders and was an expected part of the ritual. As an initiate told me weeks later “we were *told* to be rude and insult people!” For the initiates, the elders’ complacency legitimised the unnerving boundlessness of their permitted actions, and most of them – eventually – revelled in the moment. And yet it was this very complacency of the elders which imposed new boundaries in place of those that had been removed.

To be sure, authority in the *Vhusha* ceremonies is based on elders’ monopoly of esoteric knowledge, but this engenders a broader consensus of “knowing” through experience. Indeed, the logic of experience is fundamental to the creation and legitimisation of ritual knowledge (or, at least that which is differentiated from common sense [cf. Lambek 1993]) throughout southern Africa and, as we saw in the Introduction, in Papa New Guinea, Bali and Mayotte. This can be seen not only in the processes of male and female initiation but to various degrees in *ngoma* cults of affliction, in healers’ training rites, in the proliferation of AIC prophets and at the very heart of discourses of the occult. As Barth (1975, 2002) and Lambek (1993) show in diverse ethnographic settings, it is only through lived and/or embodied *experience* that ritual experts can lay claim to authentic knowledge. In this vein, illness leads to possession, dreams lead to the identification of herbal remedies, epiphanies augment the “live and direct” contact with God (even in the absence of scripture; Engelke 2007) and misfortune opens the doors to authoritative accusation.

At the *Vhusha* in Dopeni, the connection between ritual knowledge and experience was self evident; those with more experience of the ritual process had a more legitimate claim to authoritative knowledge. But, like the “well informed citizen” in Lambek’s account, the logic of experience created spaces in which *Vhusha* knowledge was regularly contested in heated debates between previously initiated women of all ages as to what the “correct” order of things should be. Issues such as the specific sequence and content of the rites, words and actions to songs or the detail of *milayo* and *Ndayo* dances were all, in this way, “up for grabs”. The ritual experts joined these debates but were often overruled by older

and more senior women who thus directly influenced the instruction of the initiates. The end product, the accumulative process of initiation, was a *bricolage* (cf. Hebdige 1979: 103-4) of contributions from all the initiated women based upon widely accepted principles and patterns they had experienced when, as girls, they were themselves "sung for". For the initiates at Dopeni, *Ludodo* appeared to offer a break from this structural position in which they were powerless to influence proceedings. Ultimately, however, the improvisation of obscene insults and death threats took place within a strictly controlled ritual context and *should* never have threatened the stratification of authority within the *Tshivhambo* in any way.

Up to the point at which a biomedical interpretation of AIDS infection became a threat to health and life, the imagined scenarios were controversial and provocative, but nonetheless *plausible* and quite within the accepted boundaries of what experience and knowledge the girls, *ideally*, should have had at that stage of initiation. The only knowledge which was acceptable was that which was *shared* by the older women – all of whom could conceive the possibilities of (but would not necessarily discuss openly) poison, bestiality and promiscuity. What did *not* constitute plausible courses of social action, however, for the senior elderly women who were most dismissive of the girls' references to AIDS, were antiretroviral therapy and the use of condoms. Whilst they would have undoubtedly heard of such things, their material existence and physical usage fell outside of the lived experience and social milieu which they, as old women, share in rural Venda.

The introduction of biomedical discourse, by the *vhatei*, through AIDS and its attempted prevention and treatment thus quite unintentionally posed a genuine threat to the monopoly of knowledge held by initiated women, setting the hierarchical structure of authority, recently bolstered by Tshivhase's public support of the project, in potential jeopardy. In this way, the words "AIDS", "condomize" and "antiretroviral therapy" appeared to the *elders* through *Ludodo* as a subversive esoteric code which had clearly been internalised by the young girls, but from which *they* remained largely uninitiated. The hostile reaction to the introduction of biomedical discourse was thus instigated not by the mention of AIDS *per se* but by the suggestive manner in which the initiates introduced a separate sphere of understanding that fell beyond the broad consensus of acceptable ritual knowledge or experience in the *Tshivhambo*. In this way, the biomedical model

appeared to be outside of the elders' control. For them, it was in direct contradiction to the *milayo* based on colour symbolism through which the *vhatei* had supposedly learned about sexual illness and morality in terms of blood taboos, the build up of pollution and conservative, appropriate sexual behaviour for young girls and their future role as wives.

A central reason for this clash of sexual cosmologies lay in the advocated use of condoms. The mention of condoms took on a multitude of unacceptable meanings for the initiated women. In a ceremony largely concerned with preparing girls with the moral and physical education to enter and endure marriage, condoms represented a serious threat to fertility and rendered the *ndayo* outlined above potentially obsolete. Despite the incorporation of masturbation into the rites, the *ndayo* did not associate sex with pleasure, but with procreativity, within which barrier methods of contraception have no place. Fhatuwanis' final attempt to lead the *Ludodo* by singing about AIDS infection thus brought the biomedical model into direct conflict with Venda aetiology. However, condoms are tolerated in very specific social situations, and conversations with initiated women after the *Vhusha* indicated that they were closely associated with extra-marital affairs, secret lovers (*mufarakono* see Chapter 4) and liaisons with prostitutes (*zwifhefhe* sing. *tshifhefhe*), all of which fall far from the "ideal" behaviour of a good wife (cf. Campbell 2003; Hunter 2002; Wojkicki 2005) and which chime with notions of how men may avoid the pollution from "dirty blood" (Chapter 6). Thus, in emphasising the rites designed to teach sexual positions, Noriah actively drew my attention to the *Ndayo* of what we both agreed – although on somewhat different pretences – was a dangerous locus of disease transmission: sexual intercourse. She did not suggest that they were more important *per se* than the other lessons of the *Vhusha*, it was more that she thought they were what I was really there to see.

A further way in which the specific aesthetics of this *Ludodo* performance blurred the familiar hierarchy of initiates was in the manner in which it spoke of a youth solidarity that transgressed the particularities of initiation hierarchy. Girls from stages one, two and three were all, in a seemingly united group, implicated in constructing the narrative. To some extent, this collapsed the established status groups in between stage one and ritual leader (see figure 3.1) into a provocative "us against them" scenario. The way in which this may have appeared to the initiated women can be explained by referring beyond the ritual context to the realm of secular life: particularly to the recent history of youth

uprisings in Venda and neighbouring areas. A great deal of literature, including Delius (1996), Bozzoli (2004) Niehaus (2000, 2001) and Ralushai (1995), has documented these uprisings, mostly of young men, against structures of traditional and generational authority in which significant numbers of elderly people were accused of practising witchcraft or “*muti* murder” for body parts. These uprisings have typically been associated with wider political changes in which groups of young people have formed new identities outside of chiefly or generational authority. The initiated women at Dopeni lived through these recent times and were thus aware of the potential danger inherent in youth rebellion. However, although the introduction of AIDS into *Vhusha* may have been vaguely reminiscent of recent history, it was by no means *intended* to be a challenge the status quo; the initiates were merely following orders.⁵²

Nonetheless, in other rural regions of South Africa, processes of initiation have been transformed along such generational divisions. In Cancele, Transkei, Ngwane has traced the changing symbolic significance and structural articulation, in the context of rising unemployment, between formal (state) education and male initiation: both of which brand young men with the “marks of home” (2004: 184). The state school, no longer the domain of white missionaries, is now just one of a number of local institutions orientated towards Xhosa social reproduction. Ngwane demonstrates the ways in which young, school going men, through the partial incorporation of the Sotho-Tswana initiation system, eventually appropriated the ritual process at the expense of older men’s authority:

For older men the [initiation] school, juxtaposed with incomplete manhood, referenced a perceived threat to their control of the means of social reproduction while for younger men the school, juxtaposed with proper manhood, referenced an alternative site for, and mode of, producing social subjectivity...which ameliorated...their politically infantilized relation to older men. (Ngwane 2004: 191)

For the older men in question, the loss of ritual authority, on top of the widespread erosion of employment opportunities, represented a new low point in an on-going, and seemingly collective, crisis of masculinity. For the younger men, the appropriation of ritual authority was partly a way of dealing with their oppression by older men and the “impossibility” of their becoming prosperous household heads in the current economic climate. The result

⁵² This reflects a broadly Marxist argument that initiates would not challenge the authority of the elders as, by enduring the ritual, they too would eventually inherit the position of authority (cf. Bloch 1992).

of this, in the initiation, was a shift from the disciplining of bodies through the teaching of rites to the articulation of rhetorical conversational processes during the initiation (2004: 189). Ngwane accounts for this in terms of different traditions of knowledge between the "local" and the "Sotho-Tswana" traditions, but to some extent, given the apparent vacuum of older men with appropriate ritual knowledge, the young local initiation leaders had little choice but to "construct speaking subjects" as opposed to the older generations concern with "listening"; the ritual knowledge had gone with the elders and there was little to listen to.

This is a revealing comparison. In some ways, this may be precisely the scenario that Noriah and the ritual experts in Venda were keen to avoid, but such an analogy underplays the extent to which initiates were motivated by deferential desires. The relative ease with which the Xhosa elders relinquished their ritual duties also speaks of deeper socio-cultural processes that may not be explicable only through recourse to the fluctuations of an economic base, and which appear to be quite different from the Venda situation whereby recent chiefly politics have bolstered ritual hierarchies. But the Transkei example also raises important issues of formal state education, and the dissemination of knowledge more widely – issues that take on quite divergent meanings when applied to the relationship between initiation, schooling and other state media in the context of sexual health.

Indeed, the dissemination of AIDS education in South Africa can perhaps help to explain, at least partially, why the biomedical model appeared as a threatening esoteric code to elderly women. As Stadler has suggested with regard to the overwhelming bias of information aimed at poor, young females, "the danger of disregarding those presumed to be at low risk...needs to be addressed through awareness and educational campaigns." (2003: 138-9). Although Stadler's comments were aimed at provoking debate into why affluent men are ignored in HIV/AIDS awareness programmes, they hold equally true for the situation regarding elderly rural women. The focus of government and NGO intervention strategies such as Love Life, Soul City, Khomanani and the Centre for Positive Care (to which I return in the following chapter) is predominantly on younger people to the exclusion of older generations. As an elderly relative of my host family in Fondwe used to say, "This AIDS talk sounds like Chinese (*tshitshainna*) to us" (Fieldwork Diary: 191).

A further reason for the unintelligibility of "AIDS talk" lay in the way young women have been forced to carry a disproportionate burden: it is they alone who are charged with conveying this biomedicinal information. Connected to this, biomedical explanations of HIV/AIDS and the potential benefits of ARVs are taught by peer educators in Tshikombani and Dopeni, and in the absence of alternative entertainment young girls often attend their public performances. AIDS has also become part of the "life orientation" course in the national schools curriculum. From grade 6 (in 2005), all school children are taught about the immune system, the possibility of infection with a virus and the role of killer T cells in the blood (Coetzee *et al.* 2004). Whilst these efforts have not been entirely futile, recent literature on the subject has questioned the extent to which school teachers can effectively discuss issues such as contraception and sexuality in rural African contexts (Gallant and Maticka-Tyndale 2004). Moreover, such governmental attempts at AIDS education are largely presented with a strong urban bias and against the backdrop of President Thabo Mbeki's and the Health Minister's confusing and contradictory public statements to which I return in the following chapter. As a result of this, the depersonalised government information campaigns are largely received with a mixture of embarrassment, confusion and scepticism (cf. Leclerc-Madlala 2005) and young women, in the guise of peer educators, have become the public face of AIDS education.

Assuming, then, that intervention strategies and the national school curriculum have at least partial success in raising awareness of AIDS, it is hardly surprising that the initiates had a better grasp of scientific explanations compared with elderly women. In this sense, the drama played out at *Ludodo* was reflective of connections between "closed" female hierarchies of ritual authority and national policy priorities. It provided a succinct demonstration of what happens when elderly people are excluded from the experience of AIDS education and the ways in which this can impinge on – and stymie – innovative approaches to prevention.

And yet national education policies alone cannot adequately explain the elders' rejection of the girls' innovation. As Ashforth (2005), Campbell (2003: 167), Stadler (2003) Walker *et al.* (2004) and Farmer (1992) concur; scientific explanations – even if they are part of a comprehensive educational programme – are easily reinterpreted and incorporated within non-scientific systems of belief. For Noriah, and most of the ritual experts at Dopeni, the

very term AIDS was problematic and biomedical explanations posed more questions than solutions. She had heard accurate versions of the biomedical model from Francina the peer educator, who had convinced her to attend a workshop facilitated by the Department of Health in which traditional healers were trained to deal with symptomatic ailments of AIDS related illness, but she remained wholly unconvinced by the biomedical model.

Like much of the middle-aged rural population in Venda and throughout southern Africa (Ingstand 1990; Heald 1995; De Bruyn 1992; MacDonald and Schatz 2006) Noriah acknowledges the accuracy of the biomedical model inasmuch as it maintains that AIDS is part of a complex of sexual illness, transmitted through blood. Like them, however, she strongly suspects that it is part of a longer trajectory through which such illnesses evolve over time, whose explanation lies in neglect of moral considerations rather than in biomedicine. For Noriah and her ilk, the current surge of illness and death of young people is attributable to a wider neglect of spiritual responsibilities and generational respect. She argues that this has heralded a rise in immoral sexual behaviour by youth who have "become lost" and are more influenced by "modern ways" (*tshizwinozwino*) than by *mvelele* (culture) (see Bujra 2000 and Baylies 2000 for an account of this in Tanzania and southern Africa more generally).

While the cause of this broader malaise might lie beyond the remit of medicine of any kind, Noriah maintains that the symptomatic cure for what doctors are calling AIDS lies in treatment with *mushonga* (herbal medicine) which as an experienced traditional healer she can provide. Antiretroviral therapy, like a course of antibiotics or the contraceptive pill, therefore constitutes a distinctly alien method of dealing with illness, which by ignoring Venda aetiology of sexual illness cannot "cure" any condition. I will return to this theme in chapter 5 in relation to musical interpretations of HIV/AIDS when I look in more detail at the ways in which AIDS *has* been incorporated into the folk model.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the dynamics of traditionalism in post-apartheid Venda through an analysis of the (attempted) revival of *Vhusha* initiation. The revival of tradition in Venda displays quite different dynamics to the concurrent revival in Kwa-Zulu Natal described by Scorgie (2002) and Leclerc-Madlala (2001, 2005). Such

accounts depict groups of women actively engaging with the biomedical model to reinvent virginity testing as a modern and relevant, if ethically questionable, means of promoting chastity in the name of HIV prevention. In Venda, the ritual experts at Dopeni forcefully excluded this model in the belief that it contradicted their pre-existing strategies to avoid sexual illness and as such challenged their authority. Chiefly power, even when it is buttressed by a governmental alliance, holds little influence over hierarchies of female, ritual authority. Indeed, the official promotion of initiation, despite its new streamlined and bureaucratised form, has reinforced this internal stratification and, crucially, further entrenched the body of ritual knowledge and experience upon which that authority structure is based. Paradoxically, this process has rendered the *Vhusha* even less amenable to change. Thus, although female initiation may appear to be a viable site for innovative AIDS education among young women, it is in fact highly unlikely that the biomedical model will be incorporated into the ritual curriculum as it is currently beyond the boundaries of what *should* be known and what can be controlled by the ritual experts. It is not part of a shared experience with which the elders could relate and, in Long's terms (1992), on the "battlefield of knowledge" – at least in the ritual context – biomedicine didn't stand a chance.

But if the initiated women were motivated largely by a concern for their own positions of privileged, then this speaks to wider regional trends of generational conflict and a perception of widespread concern with the nature of social reproduction. Contemporary Africa, it has recently been noted, appears to be "mired in a crisis of generation and regeneration...a crisis of an increasing cleavage between the 'young' and the 'old'" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 329). Whilst generational conflicts are by no means new phenomena, the dynamics of *Vhusha* in Venda provide a specific example of the nature of this conflict in terms of a post-apartheid discourse and practice of traditionalism, articulated through the connections between experience and knowledge in a ritual context. The elder's rejection of biomedicine, and the subsequent upholding of the hierarchy, was thus motivated by a sense of losing control not only over ritual knowledge, but over the very means of social reproduction its self. For Tshivhase, *Vhusha* may represent a political opportunity to invoke the African renaissance, but for the ritual elders it is fundamental to the production of personhood, and their actions demonstrated the concern that its "protracted failure, real or imagined, carries with it the spectre of

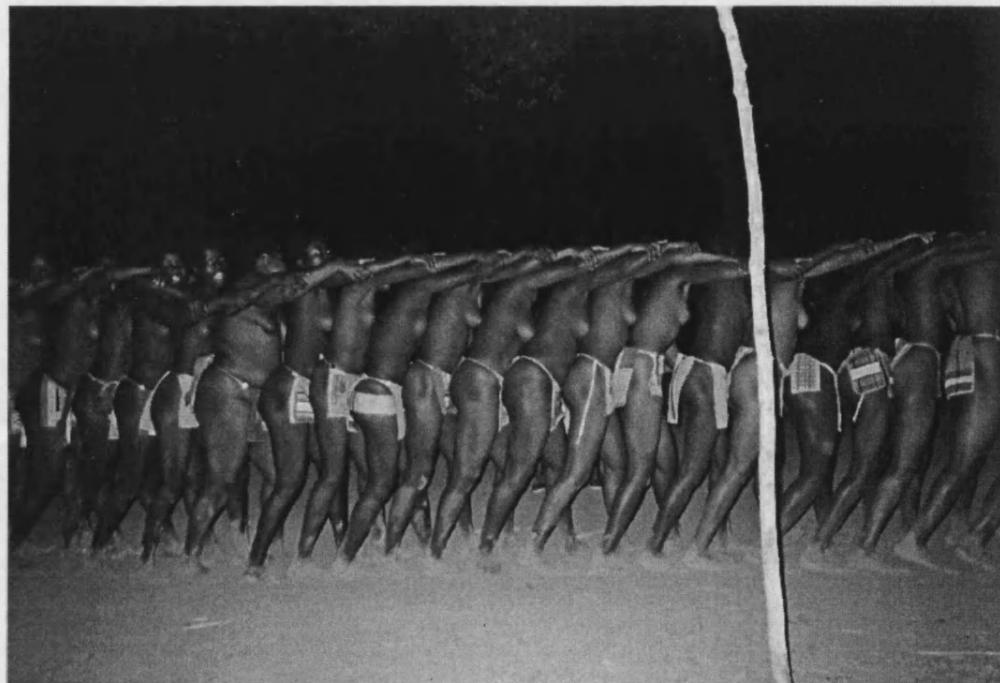
degeneration: of the future as still born, an impossibility, as a telos-in-retreat" (ibid.: 329, 336).

In a context of widespread death caused by AIDS related illness, the "future as still born" is a reality of everyday life in the postcolony. Whilst this chapter has been concerned with attempts to rectify this perceived crisis through recourse to tradition, the next chapter looks at the official government response and the role of NGOs in more conventional attempts to redress the abortive attempts at (social) reproduction that have accompanied the epidemic.

Chapter 3 Pictures



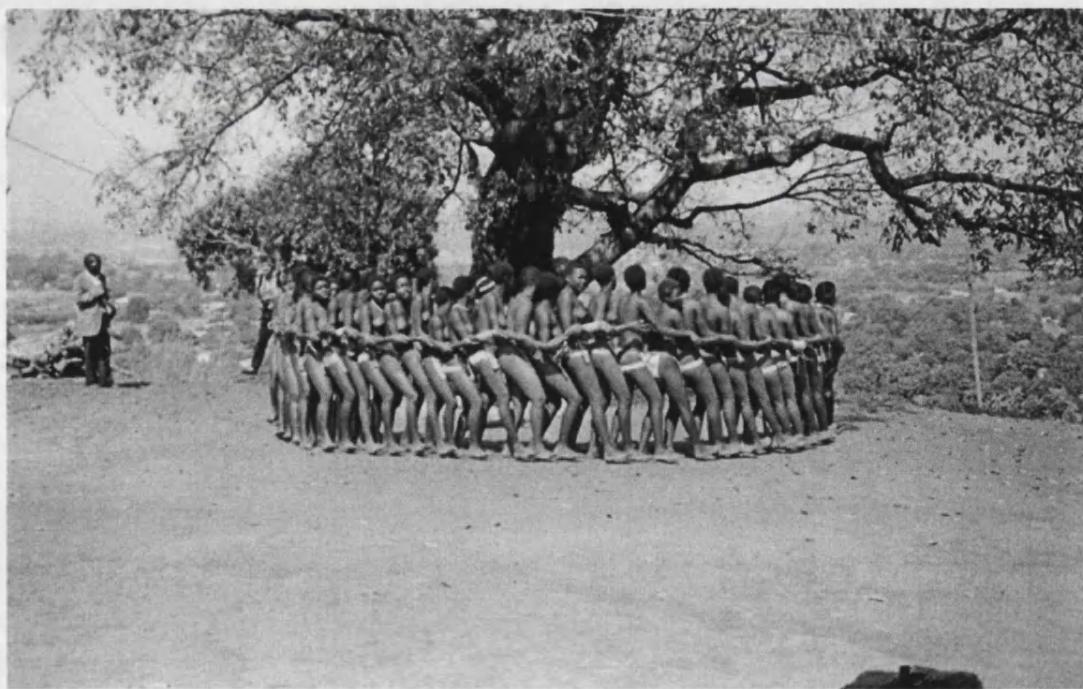
Picture 3.1: The *Domba* python dance at Tsianda *Musanda* in May, 2005. Note the ritual aprons (*mashedo*) on the initiates and the white beads marking royal status.



Picture 3.2: The *Domba* at Tsianda. May 2005.



Picture 3.3: *Domba* initiates at Mukombani in 2002 with porcupine feather headbands. The porcupine is part of a complex system of totems in Tshivhase genealogy, and is symbolic in this case of ancestral authority.



Picture 3.4: Early morning staging of the python dance at Tsianda for National Geographic photographers in January 2005.



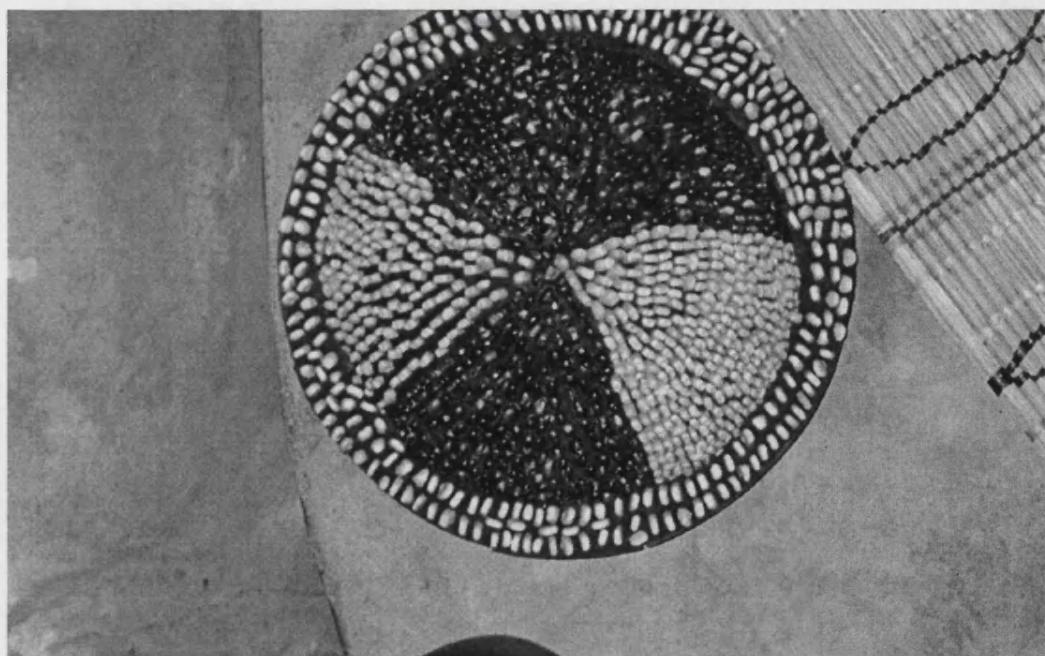
Picture 3.5: Elderly woman at Vhuhosi wearing minwenda made from salem pore material.



Picture 3.6: Noriah Ralinalala performing the rites of *Malombo* possession.



Picture 3.7: "Mother of the *Domba*" at Tsianda, playing *ngoma* with *tshiombo* drum stick.



Picture 3.8: Dried corn (*mavеле*) used in teaching colour symbolism at *Vhusha* in Dopeni.



Picture 3.9: Ritual objects of the *Vhusha* and *Domba*. Note the colours of the human sculptures (red, white and black) and of the miniature ritual hut.



Picture 3.10: Noriah Ralinala performing the sacred rites of *thevhula* on her mother's grave.

CHAPTER 4

HIV/AIDS Peer Group Education

The 8th birthday party of the Ha-Rabali peer education project was well underway as I crept into the large tent through the back entrance. Some volunteers squeezed up on the benches to give me a seat, and I got out my note-pad and pen to make a record of proceedings. The tent was full of peer educators dressed in their best finery of colourful minwenda cloth, and, as usual, I felt completely underdressed. It was unbearably hot, and the order of proceedings was being used optimistically by most of the guests as a makeshift fan. At the top table, the project co-ordinator sat in a line of distinguished dignitaries including the local traditional leader, the ANC ward councillor, a pastor, the director of the CPC and a policewoman. In due course, they rose to give lengthy contributions concerning the work of the project, pausing occasionally to sip water and wipe sweat from their brows. They were met with polite applause from the crowd. A car drew up outside and 4 women in very expensive minwenda dresses and headscarves walked into the front of the tent, accompanied by ululations that drowned out the policewoman's speech. I recognized them as peer educators from the very start of the project in 1998, whom I had not seen for years. I had been told that they were now working for the government, in the Department of Public Works, as AIDS councillors and trainers. When the dignitaries had completed their speeches, the four ex-educators rose to give a brief presentation – more like a motivational speech – on their humble beginnings and their new found status. As they received rapturous applause at the end of their contribution, a current volunteer leaned over to me and pointed at my note book. "Write this down", she said, "these women are the REAL peer educators".

In the previous chapter, I argued that AIDS education is unlikely to become established in Venda female initiation schools, and introduced the concept of peer education as the central means by which, over the past decade, people in Venda have been told about the biomedical model of HIV/AIDS in the region. I now turn to a detailed ethnographic analysis of peer education through which I will make a critical evaluation of the ways in which such projects currently operate. I will build on this critique into Chapters 5 and 6, where I consider the wider implications of current NGO policy for the efficacy of peer education projects.

Themes that have been implicit in previous chapters will be drawn upon to make this critical evaluation. Firstly, the nature of divergent status groups in Venda – as we saw in

the analysis of *Vhusha* initiation – leads to individuals joining highly differentiated social groups at various stages of their life-cycles. Whilst ascribed status seems immutable, there is some room for bettering one's position over the life course. Thus, although male authority trumps that of females, as royal status trumps that of commoner, it is possible for young girls with no chiefly connections to enter initiation schools and gradually achieve positions of status by progressing over the course of several years to the position initiated woman or ritual expert through the accumulation of knowledge, age and experience. Conversely, some families choose not to send their daughters to "be sung for", mostly on religious grounds but also through the desire to follow modern lifestyles. The subsequent analysis of peer education groups will raise important questions about these differentiations of status. It will also address differentiations of class and religious affiliation. Such deep-seated social and economic divisions, I will show, can be mediated by and subsumed within wider opportunities for upward social mobility within the changing class dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa.

This chapter has three broad sections. Firstly, I outline the South African government's response to the AIDS epidemic and the way in which this has created spaces for the participation of NGOs in AIDS interventions. Secondly, in a detailed ethnographic account of peer education, I will elucidate some of the ways that the programmes have attempted to change health related behaviour and encourage safer sexual practices. Lastly, drawing on data taken from other projects at the same organisation, I will consider the experiences and motivations of peer educators through an account of Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) and Home Based Care (HBC). This will demonstrate fundamental contradictions between the aims and objectives stated by project designers, proponents of "participatory" approaches, and the pragmatic realities of being a volunteer.

The South African Government and AIDS: 'Denial' and Renaissance

[T]he spectacular spread of the epidemic in the past decade, the inextinguishable controversy over its causes and treatment, run in terrible counterpoint to the happy narrative of national reconstruction (Fassin 2007: xvi).

The South African government's slow, often incoherent and generally problematic response to the HIV epidemic within its borders has been well documented by many

authors⁵³. The chronological development of policy is generally traced back to the National AIDS Plan, devised in 1994 based on targets set by the National AIDS Committee of South Africa (NACOSA) to implement basic levels of education and prevention throughout the country. However the National Plan was never given serious attention, owing mostly to the concurrent restructuring of health services, which were being removed from the former bantustans and placed under the control of the new structures within new provincial and municipal boundaries (Leclerc-Madlala 2005). The complex levels of government continue to inhibit the fluidity of intervention and treatment: as the director of an NGO told me, “we are still trying to learn this new system of rules that lets us get some [resources] from local government and others from provincial. I don’t know why they can’t just make it easier for us to save lives.”

Although early government attempts at intervention proved to be ineffective, the reaction to them was to set the tone for the AIDS debate in years to come. A widely reported “miracle cure” by the name of Virodene turned out, upon examination, to be a commonly used industrial solvent. Despite government backing, and to its embarrassment, the Medicines Control Council (MCC) refused applications for continued testing on humans and Virodene was scrapped. At the same time, *Sarafina II*, the youth drama intended to promote behaviour change and prevention quickly became embroiled in allegations of corruption as the total cost escalated to over R14 million. Both the Virodene and the *Sarafina II* debacles put the government on the defensive. As Schneider (2002: 147) has argued, the vocal response from civil society in opposition to early interventions set the government on a path in which its participation with external groups representing civil society was to become increasingly marginal. At this time, non-governmental groups became excluded from AIDS policy making, marking an early shift in policy from the accommodating ethos created by NACOSA.

Nonetheless, in 2000 the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) was established, headed by the then deputy president Jacob Zuma. Although SANAC is composed of 30 individuals from across a broad spectrum of government departments, faith based

⁵³ Whilst Fassin (2007) seems to suggest that social scientists have been hesitant to engage with the South African government’s response to AIDS, this would appear to be changing. See Whiteside and Suntner (2000), Schneider (2002), Schneider and Stein (2001), Nattrass (2004), Quinlan and William (2005), van der Vliet (2004), Walker *et al* (2004), Mbali (2004), Achmat (2004), Robins (2004), McGregor (2005) and Leclerc-Madlala (2005).

groups, private enterprise, and civil society, it has yet to play a significant role in policy formation or implementation. Prominent pressure groups such as TAC and the AIDS consortium were excluded from it. It is now headed by the current Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, who replaced Zuma after he was found to be in a "generally corrupt" relationship with the businessman Shabir Shaik in 2005 (Southall 2007: 16). This has been a fortuitous departure for the National AIDS Council on two levels. Firstly, in 2006, Zuma revealed in a further court appearance on charges of rape that he knowingly had unprotected sex with an HIV positive family friend and used a post-coital shower as his protection against contracting the virus. Secondly, since entering the foray, Ngcuka has made a marked improvement in government relations with civil society, being widely credited with the current rethink on AIDS policy within the cabinet (see below).

The government's relationship with external pressure groups regarding AIDS has been an uneasy one. In 1998, the National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPWA) succeeded in getting a constitutional court ruling to force the government into the provision of antiretroviral (ARV) medicine for HIV positive pregnant women (PMTCT – the prevention of mother to child transmission). NAPWA won on the basis that concurrent trials in Thailand had demonstrated that AZT (the ARV in question) can help prevent mother to child transmission of the virus by up to 50% during childbirth (AZT was later to be replaced by a similar ARV known as Nevirapine). The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) was formed on the tide of activism generated by this court victory, and they have continued to use the constitutional court system to instigate government action.

Also in 2000, and largely in response to relentless pressure created by the TAC, the *Comprehensive National HIV/AIDS and STI Strategic Plan for 2000-2005* was initiated. This set out the parameters for a governmental response to prevention, treatment, care and support but far from being a policy document, it reads more like a PowerPoint presentation and constituted a "statement of intention", making a commitment only to mid-term review as opposed to comprehensive implementation (Government of South Africa 2000). It affirmed the position of NGOs in various partnership roles with the state in the provision of prevention and treatment. In the Venda region these initiatives are largely conducted through NGOs who have taken on parastatal status since their inception as local level initiatives. As James has suggested, "in the wake of initial state indifference

about AIDS in South Africa, early non-governmental initiatives seemed to promise the best that civil society could offer" (2002: 176).

Most civil society organisations concerned with AIDS in South Africa have remained quite separate from government structures, taking a proactive role in advocacy, and only supporting the government on rare occasions. This was the case in 2001 when the TAC joined in coalition with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) to support the government in a court hearing brought by pharmaceutical multinationals to "prevent regulatory measures to reduce the cost of AIDS drugs" (Schneider 2002: 149). The pharmaceuticals lost their case, and the government won the right to import generic drugs, mostly from Brazil. This cooperation, however, was short lived. Even after the dramatic fall in price of ARVs, the government continued to insist that they were financially unviable in the public sector (see Nattrass 2004 for a comprehensive critique of the government's calculations on this). The TAC and associated bodies again threatened to take the Health Minister Tshabalala-Msimang to court, on the grounds of her reluctance to facilitate the provision of ARVs that was agreed to in yet another *HIV/AIDS Operational Plan* in September 2003. She subsequently capitulated to their demands and made commitments that the government would intervene to ensure that provision was delivered in line with the operational plan.

Progress in the national "roll-out" out ARVs, however, has been slow and of the estimated 53,000 individuals in need of medication in 2000, only 23,000 had received this by 2004. Provision of ARVs has been unequal by province, and as Gauteng lead the way, Limpopo struggled with just over 700 patients receiving treatment (Leclerc-Madlala 2005: 850).⁵⁴ By the end of December 2005, however, UNAIDS estimated that, nationally, over 111 000 people were accessing free antiretroviral treatment in 200 public health sector facilities and an additional 60 000 through the private sector. In addition, by 2004 there were over 2300 facilities providing voluntary counseling and testing, and the government's annual AIDS budget for 2005/6 was set to a substantial 2.6 billion Rand (US\$ 428 million) (UNAIDS 2007). The same organization claims that 360 million free male condoms were

⁵⁴ It should be pointed out here that such figures for the uptake of ARVs in public health facilities are problematic as they rest on the assumption that if medication is offered then it will be accepted. Low numbers in a province have thus been taken to represent inadequate standards of service provision. However, having had regular access to a pilot project through which ARVs were initially distributed in a rural hospital, it was apparent that several patients had refused treatment. This was either because they were suspicious of the efficacy of ARVs (see below) or because of the condition that they will only be provided if the patient discloses their status to a friend or family member.

distributed in 2004/5 (30 million per month) and that the government aimed to have increased this to 425 million in 2005/6. Progress may have been slow, then, and it may have been instigated by single issue pressure groups in civil society, but there has been progress. However, as we see below in the example of the Centre for Positive Care (CPC) the TAC has virtually no presence in the Venda region, and advocacy work leading to the provision of medication in the region has been thin on the ground. Also, as we will see in Chapter 6, condoms should not always be associated with the prevention of HIV, but can be implicated in its distribution.

As I mentioned above, there has been an apparent rethink on the government's AIDS policy. At the time of writing (mid March 2007), the South African Government had recently announced yet another 5 year plan to half the number of infections by 2011 and push for a wider expansion in the provision of antiretrovirals in line with internationally recognised benchmarks for assessing progress. This has been accompanied by a remarkable thawing of relations between the TAC and government, largely through the intervention of Deputy President Ncguka. Although the Deputy President's appointment was not without controversy with ANC supporters (she is married to National Director of Public Prosecutions Bulelani Nguka who was associated with Zuma's involvement in the Shaik trial), she has been welcomed as a progressive thinker who accepts conventional scientific evidence that ARVs can help slow the reproduction of HIV in the blood, and there would appear to be a general optimism that has been absent in AIDS advocacy circles.

The hitherto prevalent pessimism has been associated with the slow and difficult progress in the construction and implementation of AIDS policy which is widely believed to have been influenced by President Mbeki's alliances with "dissident" scientists. Since the late 1990s, Mbeki has courted unorthodox positions held by scientists such as David Rasnick and Peter Doesberg, who draw on authors such as Root-Bernstein (1993) in their challenges to conventional biomedical approaches to HIV and AIDS. Mbeki chose to share his dissident sympathies with the international community at the International AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000 where he informed a bemused audience that "not everything could be blamed on a single virus" (Mbali 2004: 105; cf. Fassin 2007). In the same year, he convened the Presidential Advisory Panel on AIDS to which dissident scientists were invited, and although the resultant statement from the panel said nothing

new, it cemented the relationship between Mbeki and the international community of unorthodox AIDS scientists.⁵⁵

In 2002, however, amid international outrage at his seemingly negligent stance, and possibly out of concern that it may be damaging international confidence in the Rand, Mbeki withdrew from public debate on AIDS. His continued silence on the issue and refusal to openly accept orthodox biomedicine has, however, contributed to the maintenance of confusion rather than alleviating it. It has ensured that government mass media interventions such as the distribution of biomedical information and notification of government services through the *Khomanani* leaflets or the *Soul City* drama series have been received with suspicion and uncertainty (Leclerc-Madlala 2005: 849). NGOs have attempted to fill this void with authoritative information through strategies such as peer group education, but they too, as we shall see, have struggled to evade complex levels of reinterpretation.

This has been compounded by the involvement of outspoken Health Minister Dr. Manto Tshabalala Msimang, who has taken up where Mbeki left off. Msimang has made no secret of her belief that ARVs are poisonous or that the consumption of raw garlic, lemon juice, the African potato (*hypoxis rooperi*), beetroot and multi-vitamin supplements are more beneficial to patients with immunodeficiency than ARVs. She has been influential in this. McGregor (2005) gives a moving biographic account of the popular DJ Khabzela, who died of AIDS related illness whilst subscribing to Msimang's doctrine. Moreover, the recent ease with which the Rath Foundation has promoted its vitamin supplements and a hate campaign against the TAC (who it accuses of working with pharmaceutical companies to generate wealth from ARVs) has led some to suspect that they may be in cahoots with the government (Leclerc-Madlala *ibid.*) although there would appear to be no solid evidence for this speculation.

⁵⁵ This international community of dissident journalists, scientists, PLWA and others is not insignificant. It contains several high profile individuals such as Nobel Prize winner for Chemistry Karry Mullise and Harim Caton, a retired professor of politics and history, and a fellow of the Australian Institute for Biology. They are joined by numerous eminent professors of biology and virology who all question the scientific AIDS orthodoxy. Such 'communities' have, along with other conspiracy theorists, flourished on the internet and through web sites such as www.aidsmyth.addr.com and www.virusmyth.net they have established networks, email lists and petitions through which they lobby policy makers. These websites support Mbeki explicitly, and promote him as a champion for their cause.

There have been two main explanations proposed for the government's denialist position on AIDS, one of which takes us back to neoliberal policies and the other to previously outlined "Africanist" interpretations of the renaissance. It should be underlined strongly here that the term "denialist" is being employed at this point as an analytical tool for the ways in which the South African *government* has responded to the AIDS epidemic. In Chapter 6, I make an argument based on a different understanding of the term "denial" in the context of the so-called public silence (Stadler 2003) through which AIDS is privately acknowledged as a cause of death, but publicly shrouded in secrecy. Following Mbali (2004), the notion of denialism in the context of the government's response refers to the rejection of the link between HIV and AIDS, the claim that HIV tests are inaccurate and the assertion that antiretrovirals are damaging to an individual's health. Thabo Mbeki and Manto Tshabalala Msimang have both made such claims repeatedly, and the government's response to AIDS can thus be described, in this context, as denialist.

Mbali has argued that the turn to conservative macro-economic policy in the mid to late 1990s, as we saw in the Introduction through a paradigm shift towards GEAR, is closely associated with the government's stance on the virus. He argues that it "neatly complements the government's adoption of poverty-entrenching neoliberal economic policies" (2004: 109) and that the denial of HIV/AIDS at a national level has acted as a convenient clause to avoid the drastic public spending that a full acceptance of the problem would demand. However such an argument lacks evidence, and would appear to be refuted by the UNAIDS figures given above that demonstrate a substantial financial commitment to fighting the epidemic, and also by Nattrass (2007) who highlights the extent of state welfare that is available for those infected and affected by the virus. It also underestimates the extent of funding that flows into South Africa from charitable organisations such as Oxfam or Save the Children, and foreign government development agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DIFID) or USAID.

A more convincing explanation for the "state of denial" as Elaine Epstein dubbed it in her 1999 documentary, may be that it is "a response to the history of racist colonial and apartheid discourses of African sexuality" (Mbali 2004: 111). In this reading, Mbeki's refusal to accept scientific orthodoxy should be seen in the context of a wider rejection of notions that he believes underpin science as a vehicle for neo-imperialism. Thus, he has made the sarcastic argument that:

[W]e [black people] are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order [who] cannot subject...passion to reason...we are but natural born promiscuous carriers of germs...they [scientists] proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our devotion to the sin of lust (Mbeki, Mail and Guardian, October 26, 2001 in Mbali 2004: 111).

There can be little doubt that the colonial construction of Africa sexuality did indeed frame Africans as *inter alia* rampantly promiscuous, with endemic immorality and barbaric, animalistic qualities (Vaughn 1991). Whither this was as a result of constructing the other in such a way as to free ourselves of any vestiges of barbarism and clear the path for our own psychological and material development (McGrane 1989) or whither it reflected simply the fear of difference has not been of central concern to Mbeki. In it, he has read the tendency to stereotype African sexuality in a way that dehumanises and discriminates against black people, and his rejection of arguments that the AIDS problem is connected to the ways in which African people reproduce, Mbali argues, should be seen in these terms (cf. Fassin 2007).

In this context, then, the government's response to AIDS has been a call for "African solutions to African problems" *a la* the African renaissance. It is an attempt at the decolonisation of consciousness. Schneider (2002: 151) for example has read the openness to considering Virodene in the context of "championing African-initiated science". There is no space under this rubric for racist colonial attitudes and, for Mbeki and his ilk the imposition of orthodox science as a compulsory explanatory paradigm through which they must *think* and engage in debates about AIDS has been unacceptable. This has constituted a critique of the political economy of biomedical research (Schneider *ibid.*) Nonetheless, as Mbali points out, the dominant discourse around AIDS in development and interventionist circles has, for many years now, been framed in a rights based dialogue that actively avoids such stereotypes. Mbeki's refusal to recognise this, and his current silence on the topic, has left those who work towards reducing transmission of the virus in South Africa on a sticky wicket when his public endorsement of their activities is much needed.

And yet whilst this disappointing response by some at the national level of government is important to recognise, it is equally important to point out that Mbeki's hawkish questioning of AIDS orthodoxy and Tshabalala-Msimang's promotion of lemon juice and

garlic over ARV drugs has *never* become policy. As I describe below, there has been a remarkable consistency at the local level with standard biomedical approaches to AIDS, and government trained NGO peer educators promote scientific orthodoxy as opposed to dissident points of view. This contradiction and lack of high-brow political leadership has led to widespread confusion and uncertainty in the reception of such interventions, but it can not be held solely responsible for the mixed fortunes that they have encountered. A closer look at the dynamics of NGO AIDS intervention is required to ascertain exactly what form these mixed fortunes have taken, and what their implications may be:

The Centre for Positive Care

The CPC⁵⁶ is the brainchild of Harold Lemke, an American Buddhist monk who lived in Venda between 1980 and 1998. In 1993, after nursing a close friend who died of an AIDS related illness, Harold became a self-styled, completely untrained, AIDS educator, holding public meetings and distributing the few condoms that he was provided by the Department of Health and Welfare. I was with him at many of the early meetings at which his eloquent but apocalyptic talks were met with a combination of suspicion and dread, creating a state of fear that he hoped would induce the practice of safer sex.

By 1997 Harold had procured the voluntary services of two individuals, one of whom, Mashudu, worked at the local hotel, and the other, Albert, had been a commander in the ANC's military wing *UmKhonto weSizwe* (MK). They registered the Centre for Positive Care with the Department of Social Development as an NGO in 1997 and secured a start-up grant from the Department of Health for R80,000. This paid rent for their first single room office in Thohoyandou and provided a small stipend for the two volunteers.

Albert's high profile ANC contacts were to prove invaluable in future dealings with the government, especially in securing funding. Since 1994, it has been official procedure for all foreign donations to NGOs in South Africa to be diverted to a central fund, and the government has initiated a centralised system of tendering intended to systematise the unprecedented level of aid and promote competition amongst "service providers" (James 2002: 176). Although, as James has noted, this manner of funding generated confusion

⁵⁶ www.posicare.org.za

in many “formalised anti-AIDS education initiatives” (*ibid.*) for the CPC, at least in its early format, it was a blessing. Due to the excessive bureaucratic procedures that this has entailed, however, many funders prefer to bypass the central pot and deposit money directly into the CPC bank account.

Given its regularly maintained connections in the government and the distinct lack of advocacy work in its activities, it may be misleading to think of the CPC as non-governmental. Indeed, as Ferguson has recently argued, “local voluntary organisations...very often, on inspection, turn out to be integrally linked with national- and transnational-level entities” (2006: 101). In a wider commentary on the ways in which such organisations have often “taken over the most basic functions and powers of the state [in post-colonial African countries]” he argues that “[some] NGOs are not as NG as they might wish us to believe” (*ibid.*). For this reason, the World Bank reportedly refers to BONGOS (bank-organised NGOs) and GONGOS (government-organised NGOs). In this context, the CPC could perhaps be referred to as a non-profit organisation (NPO), or even as a Community Based Initiative (CBI) – both of which terms are common in South Africa’s burgeoning lexicon of development jargon. However the solution of simply changing the acronym possibly belies the fact that there is something intrinsically ambiguous about such local voluntary organisations. They are neither “governmental” nor “non-governmental”. As I demonstrate below, they are commonly used – at least in the Venda region – as a stepping-stone *between* voluntary and state employment. In this context they may also be thought of as “quasi-governmental” (Ferguson 1994: 6; cf. Fisher 1997; James 2007).

Having secured tenders from the government for the provision of home based care and voluntary counselling and testing in the Vhembe district, the CPC has become an important service provider for out-sourced government initiatives. As the Director explained to me:

We don't really have a 'good' relationship with the government – most of it is just forced...people in government positions are always changing and we can not waste time by trying to become friends with them...we have jobs to do and people are dying. But we do not own these people [the volunteers], we do not own the projects, we are just an extended hand of what the government is supposed to do, but it can't – so you see we can assist in that (Mashudu interview side 1 tc 403 and side 2 tc 278).

Thus, although the close relationship between the CPC and government was born out of the necessity to access funds, there can be little doubt that it became a virtue, allowing the remit of the CPC to mushroom rapidly. In addition to this, however, they have maintained very strong connections with a number of national and international development organisations and faith based groups such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (ELCSA), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) and Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO, UK). An important exemption from this list is the Treatment Action Campaign whose presence is yet to be felt in the region but is widely influential in other regions of South Africa.

Moreover, whilst much funding is secured via government bodies, a significant number of projects at the CPC are sponsored directly by national and international donors. In May, 2005, these included AusAID (Australian government), USAID (United States), Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation – Secure the Future (BMS-STF), Christian Aid, Family Health International (FHI), National Development Agency (NDA), Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) OXFAM Australia (joint HIV/AIDS programme – JOHAP), Reggio nel Mondo, and Save the Children (UK and Sweden). It is from most of these organizations that donations are deposited directly into the CPC bank account – avoiding the extra bureaucracy of going through national or provincial government offices. This does not, however, guarantee that funding will reach the intended projects: missing cash is often blamed on complications such as the international currency exchange rate or exorbitant bank fees. In the knowledge, then, that there is an intrinsic tension in these organisations' allegedly non-governmental character, I use the term NGO when referring to the CPC.

Highly critical of international patterns of development in which NGOs often become dependent on foreign support for daily survival and accountability, and having trained the two volunteers in basic administration and proposal writing, Harold Lemke decided to leave in 1998. Besides his disaffection with these patterns of dependency, his departure was also prompted by his astute observation that for the CPC to achieve its objectives and survive in post-apartheid South Africa it would have to be run "by Vendas for Vendas". By 1999 the organisation had received a second supplementary grant of R50,000 from the Department of Health and Welfare that enabled it to take on 3 more

volunteers. The new recruits forged pivotal roles in developing the home based care and "youth in school" HIV awareness programmes.

Through a chance encounter with the head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Zimbabwe in 1998, Mashudu and Albert travelled to Harare for training that would equip them with the skills to establish peer group education and home based care projects in Venda. These programmes were designed in Zimbabwe in collaboration with the Project Support Group (PSG), an organisation funded largely by the Norwegian, Netherlands and Swedish governments, that has assisted in setting up and funding many AIDS interventions in Southern Africa (cf. Campbell 2003).⁵⁷ Establishing a partnership with PSG was a significant turning point in the development of the CPC as it initiated the now well ingrained emphasis on participatory approaches and offered models for the means by which these could be established, co-ordinated and evaluated.

Today, the CPC has grown into a major player in the provision of health care in the Limpopo Province and acts in its own capacity as a mentor and reference point for emerging NGOs in the area. It "facilitates" peer education, home based care, voluntary counselling and testing and projects for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) throughout the province and in neighbouring Botswana. Mashudu, the first volunteer, is now the Director of the organisation and Albert secured a managerial position at the regional level in the Department of Health and Welfare in 2002. Such examples of upward mobility are important and I will return to them in due course.

However, in order to consider the ways in which the CPC exemplifies broader trends in NGO-organised peer education, we must now look at the spread of participatory approaches to public health, and examine the theory of effective learning which underpins these approaches.

⁵⁷ For more details about PSG visit www.psgsa.org.za

The Theoretical Underpinnings of Peer Group Education

The current dominance of peer group education as a method of HIV/AIDS prevention can be traced to the emergence of participatory approaches to development in the 1980s and early 90s. Seminal texts such as those by Chambers (1983, 1994) and Cernea (1991) paved the way for a plethora of literature devoted to the promotion of "participation" based largely on "Knowledge, Attitudes, Practice" (KAP) in a sphere of operation in which "top down", state-centred approaches had previously prevailed. This literature was both influenced by and had influence on the strategic planning of institutions such as the World Bank that began to support "greater involvement of 'local' people's perspectives, knowledge, priorities and skills...[as an alternative to]...outsider-led development" (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 5). As we saw in the Introduction, this can be understood in terms of attempts to alter divergent traditions of knowledge (Long 1992).

The surge in popularity for participation in development projects has reflected the increasing concern that citizens ought to participate fully in the processes of democracy. To this end, the African Union (AU) recently made a constitutional undertaking in favour of "democratic principles (and) *popular participation*" (Lodge 2002: 233 my italics). Indeed, for Guijt and Shah (1998: 1 in Cooke and Kothari 2001), the broad aim of participatory development is to "increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision-making over their own lives" (cf. Parker 1996). Baylies has captured the essence of this by arguing that a participatory, "bottom up approach" acknowledges the "legitimacy of local knowledge and the ability of individuals to know and verbalise their needs" (2000: 133).

In development projects devoted to the promotion of public health, this also reflected and was influenced by a general acceptance among scholars on the topic that wellbeing should not be considered the end result of an individual's life-choices, but rather a social phenomenon played out among historically and culturally constituted class and status groups with distinct life-chances. This heralded a paradigm shift in models for the promotion of public health in developed and developing countries.

“Behavioural” interventions, common before this shift, had been heavily influenced by European and US experiences of HIV among groups of gay men and injecting drug users, and had sought to provide knowledge and encourage individual action, from the “top down”. Largely due to the effective organisational structures employed by groups of gay men, this strategy was reasonably successful (Watney 1989) and so policy makers assumed its universality. In Africa, this translated into models that assumed people practiced risky sex because they lacked adequate information, and the overwhelming early focus on KAP was implemented in this context (cf. Heald 2005).

However, public health policy makers soon realised that education alone was insufficient as a motivational factor for the instigation of behavioural change. Also in Europe, as the epidemiology of HIV began to make more substantial impacts on heterosexual populations, models in Africa for the promotion of public health moved towards “community” based strategies that were intended to promote collective responses from the “bottom up”. Following this logic, the reason why education alone had failed to induce safer sex was to be found in the often ill defined concept of power. Specific groups such as “youth” and “women” were – and still are – characteristically defined as in a state of disempowerment, and thus found to be in need of empowerment which, in reality, translated into the provision of employment, more education, or both. Moreover, for this process to be successful, it would have to be participatory, and as this logic has been adapted more recently to HIV/AIDS peer education, the notions of empowerment and participation have become central tenets of project designs (cf. Kalipeni *et al.* 2007).

This can be seen to reflect in recent development/social psychology literature, in which it has generally been argued that participation plays a key role in health-related behaviours and in the reconstruction of sexual identities. In this process, Campbell has suggested that people are motivated by a “fundamental human need for positive self esteem, self efficacy or empowerment” (1998: 57).

HIV/AIDS peer education thus seeks to empower educators by:

Transferring health related knowledge from the hands of outside experts to the hands of ordinary people, increasing their sense of perceived control over their health... [and] ...deriving respect and recognition for their role in promoting health (Campbell 2000: 492).

Although these theoretical assumptions will be criticised later in more detail, it must be noted here that they employ overtly Eurocentric notions pertaining to the bounded, objectified self – albeit in a group context. For several generations now, a fundamental contribution of anthropology to intellectual debates has been to demonstrate that such a “self” cannot be assumed to exist in an apolitical or non-historical vacuum or, more generally, as a desirable construction of identity across cultures (cf. for example, Chabal and Daloz 1999: 52-53; Erikson 1995; Keesing and Strathern 1998). Indeed, if it is to be of use in determining the efficacy of peer education projects, any “fundamental human need for...empowerment” must be qualified strictly in terms of culturally and historically constituted understandings of the self and sexualities which may or may not reflect post-enlightenment conceptions. Without such qualification, authors and project designers may be in danger of imposing etic, authoritative notions of human nature which are as likely to impede our understanding of the potential of participatory efforts to promote safer sex as they are to complement or assist them.⁵⁸

Failing to recognise this, HIV/AIDS peer education has been deemed by project designers as being successful if, encompassing the prospects for self-directed change, it instigates the collective renegotiation of social and sexual roles among target groups. In South Africa, these are generally commercial sex workers, compounded migrant labourers and “youth”, all of whom are held to be disempowered and to experience low levels of control over the construction of their sexual identities. In its *ideal* context and under *ideal* conditions, peer education is thus based on the premise that:

People evaluate changes not on the basis of scientific evidence or authoritative testimony, but by subjective judgements of close, trusted peers who have adopted changes and provide persuasive role models for change (Wilson 2000).

For example, current projects aimed at young people in South Africa such as *Love Life* train a core of individuals known as “groundbreakers” from schools and youth centres in

⁵⁸ By “sexual identities”, authors seem to be referring to the ways in which people have sex, and power relationships that mould this. Although I am limited by word constraints at this juncture, there is scope here for a wider engagement with more recent criticisms of identity as an analytical term (Cooper 2005). It is not clear, for example, why such a fluid, contested and consistently re-constructed concept should be labelled a (sexual) identity, nor if we can really ascribe such a category to groups of people who are unaware that they ought to have one.

participatory teaching methods.⁵⁹ These include interactive dramas, role-plays, songs and public performances in which groundbreakers are intended to transmit their newly-acquired life skills and health related knowledge to their contemporaries. Theoretically, the peer groups in these projects are made critically conscious (Freire 1972) of the potentially dangerous impact that socially and historically constructed gender roles such as "macho-style" masculinity in boys and passiveness in girls can have on their sexual health. They are then made aware of the impact that poverty and unemployment can have in structuring and reinforcing these identities. On this basis, with the peer educators as positive role models who (at least theoretically) lead by example, it is hoped that others will follow their lead and renegotiate health enhancing behaviour.

With such financial and institutional support and a theoretical backing by academics concerned with development, participation and empowerment, peer education has become "one of the most commonly used strategies of health promotion in the world" (Campbell 2003: 42). The proliferation of the strategy in South Africa is thus reflective of trends through out the continent (Hope 2003; Basset 1998; Leonard *et al.* 2000; Wolf *et al.* 2000) and beyond (Fernandes *et al.* 1999; Lamprey and Gayle 2001; Barnett and Whiteside 2002; Campbell and McPhail 2002).

However, although considerable resources have been channelled into peer education, there is a distinct absence of research on or knowledge of "the means by which, and the effectiveness with which the programmes change sexual behaviour" (James 2002: 180; cf. Turner and Shepard 1999; Campbell 2003). Our understanding of the social processes underlying the alleged efficacy of so-called participatory approaches to health promotion thus remains in its infancy, and the faith with which donors continue to fund programmes seems increasingly problematic given the possibility that they are "costing lives as well as funds" (Kapeleni *et al.* 2007).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Love Life was initially established by the Department of Health and Welfare, but is now well funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which works in partnership with the Department on several HIV/AIDS projects.

⁶⁰ Current strategies for prevention are not limited to peer education. For example, a great deal of research is currently underway to assess the efficacy of microbicides, the female diaphragm and male circumcision, although such approaches have yet to be widely implemented in South Africa. See the 2006 UNAIDS report http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2006/2006_GR_CH06_en.pdf.

Peer Education in Venda

The Centre for Positive Care has been facilitating peer education projects among groups of young (18-30 years) women in Venda since 1998. This mirrors a substantial body of work that has demonstrated – in a classic example of “knowledge for action” (Cernea 1995) – the extent to which young women in southern African are the most susceptible demographic category to HIV infection.⁶¹ Since 1998, the CPC has expanded from two projects to 24, covering the Limpopo Province from Doreen farm project in the north to Ha-Muila in the south. In May 2005 there were over 500 peer educators, the vast majority of whom were young (18-30) unmarried women. The bulk of my data is drawn from 4 peer education projects comprising an average of 25 volunteers each at Tshikombani (which included my host village Fondwe), Ha-Matsa (towards the N1 to Zimbabwe), Ha-Rabali (in the central Nzhelele region) and Tshakhuma (to the south; see Map 4).⁶²

The recruitment process for peer educators should follow a conventional structure designed by PSG (Wilson 2000). According to this model, an initial baseline survey is conducted in which CPC staff request permission firstly from local traditional leaders (*Magota* – Chapter 2) to start work in the area. Permission has never been withheld, and in general peer education projects have a good working relationship with traditional authorities. Indeed, traditional leaders are encouraged to send young women from their homesteads to join projects. This is done in the knowledge that such women will report back to royal circles, and as such they fulfil a dual role of project members and royal spies. This is advantageous to project leaders in that it maintains corridors of communication with traditional leaders, although the recent rise in numbers of headmen has seen some confusion as to whom, exactly, they should be in communication with.

At the same time, CPC staff frequent beer halls, cafes and night spots and initiate dialogue with working girls. This either leads to an individual or small group being recruited for peer education or to their rejecting the idea. Potential volunteers are always told up-front that their time will be offered on a voluntary basis, but that eventually they

⁶¹ See Oppong (1998), MacDonald (1996), Baylies (2000), Bujra and Baylies (2000), Bujra (2000a), Craddock (2000, 2007), Kapeleni (2000), Sikwibele *et al.* (2000), Kapeleni *et al.* (2004).

⁶² The Tshakhuma project is an Integrated prevention and HBC programme. The CPC has recently established three such integrated projects, where the volunteers have responsibility for home based care and peer education.

will receive a small stipend. In reality a monthly stipend of R250 (in September 2005) is given to the volunteers from their first meeting. The strategy of misleading them about the regularity of payment is intended to dissuade transient, migrating women, common around the border areas, who may be tempted to take the first payment and leave the area.

In accordance with the PSG model, the projects should ideally consist of commercial sex workers, and as a “peer group”, they should encourage and support each other (and their clients) to adopt safer sexual behaviour.⁶³ With the exception of a few projects on the borders, however, the recruitment process has failed to attract enough sex workers (or women who would admit to selling sex) and thus other women have been asked to join. Local church groups, civic associations and burial societies are all targeted to make up the numbers. Women also volunteer after hearing of a project through pavement radio (word of mouth – Ellis 1989). As will become clear, the resultant mixed bag of motivations, aspirations, and expectations of such different groups of women throws the very notion of “peer” education into question.

Volunteers are introduced to their project co-ordinator at the first meeting. Co-ordinators are chosen from established projects for their ability to communicate information and to clearly impart participatory methods to new recruits. They must have, for example, a vast repertoire of songs and drama topics from which to draw during their training. The co-ordinators and volunteers are frequently “work-shopped” by representatives from the Department of Health to ensure that their knowledge is up-to-date, and thus the content of peer education programmes has changed markedly with the provision of government funded antiretroviral medication and Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT). This is reflected in the songs to be analysed in the next chapter. The lyrical content, dramas and role-plays have changed quite significantly over time in line with government and international funding priorities. Thus the early emphasis on AIDS related information, condoms and prevention has to a large extent been replaced by an emphasis on the prominence of HIV testing, the provision of antiretrovirals and other treatment in support of the national roll-out. In this context, the role of peer education can be seen not just as

⁶³ Hunter (2002) and Wojcicki (2005) have problematised the notion of “sex worker” with a discussion on wider transactional relationships through which trust and obligation often develop. The term ‘sex worker’ is used here with reference to women who sell sex at beer halls or on main roads – but any precise definition of the term remains problematic.

a means of attempting to enable health enhancing social situations, but as a peripatetic advertisement for the various services provided by the CPC and the state at hospitals, clinics and health centres.

As the weekly on-going training continues, the co-ordinator gives out bright red uniforms and explains about their R250 monthly stipend (the co-ordinators themselves receive R1000 per month). The volunteers learn that this is in return for a minimum of 27 hours a week, divided between training (6/7 hours), house meetings (6 meetings of 3 hours each) and a Friday public performance (2/3 hours). They are then divided into 3 or 4 geographical "zones" in which they conduct house-to-house meetings, and each zone nominates a leader. This system also helps to organize the pragmatics of project management in that a rota system dictates which zone will have certain responsibilities each week, such as cooking at the on-going training or organising and facilitating the Friday public performance. The first task of each zone is to draw a map of their area indicating the roads, houses, farms, beer halls, churches, clinics, etc. onto which they record their activities and plan future outings.

During training, peer educators are taught biomedical HIV/AIDS information in the context of general health and life skills such as hygiene, basic dietetics and methods of family planning. Armed with (or, theoretically, empowered by) this knowledge, and the ability to demonstrate the use of a condom, peer educators are then sent into the surrounding villages to visit homes in their respective zones on Monday and Wednesday mornings. The home visits are not usually pre-arranged, and although they should last up to 3 hours, in fact they generally take place for no more than 30 minutes.

Dressed in their bright red uniforms (see pictures 4.1, 4.2), they approach homesteads in which they can see people are present. If they are permitted to enter, they are seated (like all visitors) outside the main room of the kraal. As the reason for their visit has been disclosed by their uniform, pleasantries are kept to a minimum and the zone leader initiates a conversation about general health and well-being in the homestead. The hosts are encouraged to be open with any questions they may have regarding HIV/AIDS and the peer educators answer them as best they can, often using diagrams and pictures. If they come across any house-bound people, they are reported to the nearest home based care project who then make follow-up visits. When they leave, they offer condoms and

government leaflets, and provide a contact number for any questions that may arise in the future. As we see in the following chapters, however, it is common for people to hide inside their homes when they see the red uniforms approaching, and the educators are often refused entry to a homestead. For this reason, the houses that are visited are often those of a relative or sympathetic friend, and they target people who are walking around, trying to instigate conversations with them as they walk. Nonetheless, a strict record of the proceedings is kept and presented to the group at the next on-going training meeting.

This weekly pattern of activity has resulted in a staggering volume of statistics that record "facts" and figures such as "clients served", "females/males reached" "condoms distributed" etc. These figures are reproduced in donor reports and made into seductive PowerPoint presentations for visiting "experts" from overseas funding groups and government departments (cf. Huges-d'Aeth 2002; Molassiotis *et al.* 2005; Lindegger and Maxwell 2005; Raman 2005). They create a false sense of efficacy and are ultimately manufactured into documents that encourage the continuation of funding. This has contributed to a lack of critical appraisal in programme design and evaluation, and the CPC has barely modified the structure of peer education projects since implementation in 1998.

One significant exception to this was the recent attempt to incorporate men into several peer education projects. Although "targeting men" has received some attention in the literature, the incorporation of men into pre-existing female projects has not.⁶⁴ Following instructions from several funders to extend peer education projects beyond their exclusively female focus, from 2003 the CPC attempted to recruit males. This was, without exception, a resounding failure. Most of the women resented the few men who did get involved as they dominated any discussion and refused to take part in what they perceived to be women's songs. This led to a recruitment drive for younger men, aged between 18-23, who in turn were bullied by many of the women and looked ridiculous

⁶⁴ Although their contributions have yet to match the volumes on women, authors such as Kaler (2004), Niehaus and Jonnson (2005) Simpson (2005, 2007) and Hunter (2005) have made important improvements to our understanding of the ways in which men in a variety of social and economic contexts have adapted and reacted to the virus. Niehaus (2002) has pointed to the complexities of male-male sex in migrant labour compounds and prisons. McPhail (2003) and Wood *et al.* (1998) emphasize the manner in which heterosexual men are defined through acquisition of multiple partners, through "macho" masculinities, exercising power over women and espousing negative attitudes towards condoms, with McPhail indicating that this can often be in conflict with the "true" emotional vulnerabilities of young men. See also Stadler (2003).

impersonating female dances. A few who joined did so with ulterior motives and struck up intimate relationships with peer educators, which they cited in their defence as they were ridiculed by other men at public performances. The current CPC policy on male peer educators is unclear, and raises issues, to which I shall return shortly, of how pragmatic experience may undermine funding priorities.

A central element of the peer education programme as designed by PSG is the Friday afternoon public performance. This mostly takes place in beer halls, but also at market places, taxi ranks, clinics or other such public arenas, and it involves a progression through 6 distinct stages:

Stage 1: Introduction by means of a variation of the *Domba* initiation 'python dance' or a popular song in which the lyrical content has been changed to include information on the CPC. They gather about 200 meters from the 'stage' which can be anything from a dancing arena in a beer hall to an open space in a market place, then move towards it slowly and loudly.

Stage 2: Once the stage has been taken, two or three popular songs fused with HIV/AIDS information are sung *a capella* to draw and entertain a crowd.

Stage 3: Drama/role plays; inspired by life experience and introducing themes such as polygamy, rape, domestic violence, alcoholism, commercial sexual encounters, sexual health, family relations, HIV transmission and AIDS related illness. These provide amusement to some and discomfort to others. The discomfort is usually manifest in men leaving the space created for peer education, heckling or attempting to hinder proceedings.

Stage 4: A facilitated question-and-answer session, developing issues emerging from or emotions generated by the previous section in which the zone leader in charge asks "What did you see there?", "Does this happen in your community?" "How do you respond when this happens?" "Do you think this behaviour is acceptable?" etc. This stage usually involves the circulation of a large wooden penis, onto which individuals are encouraged to roll a condom. This potentially chaotic section is thought of as the 'heart of the performance', during which peer educators stand in a two deep solid line of red, behind the leader who is responsible for co-ordinating the discussion and circulating the phallic prop. If the conversation is slow to develop, some peer educators may stand amongst the crowd and ask provocative questions to stimulate discussion. See picture 4.3.

Stage 5: "*Zwino ari lidza dzingoma!*" [Let's play the drums!]. This section – which is often the most lengthy and exuberant, involves performances adapted from the repertoire of 'traditional' Venda music. This can include *malende* beer songs, *tshifhase* adolescent dances, songs from girls' initiation schools, and the female *tshigombela*. Like the gospel songs adapted in the earlier stages, the 'traditional' renditions are fused with biomedical HIV/AIDS information [see the next chapter]. The 'traditional' dancing involves solo performances in which peer educators compete with each other in technique and innovation. This can get overtly sexual and provocative as buttocks are shaken towards the crowd.

Stage 6: The distribution of condoms. The entire performance hinges on condoms being free and plentiful. The Department of Health and Welfare has vastly improved the previously inconsistent supply of condoms. They are now freely available – although it is not clear what percentage of those taken as 'freebies' are actually used in the desired manner.⁶⁵ See picture 4.2

This formula is currently used throughout Venda by groups of CPC peer educators. The way in which different song types, acting, performance and AIDS related information are strung together bears distinct resemblance to "cultural productions" by Mayibuye and the Amandla Cultural Ensemble by ANC members in exile during the struggle (Gilbert: Forthcoming). Such productions were used to raise support for the anti-apartheid movement outside South Africa. The symbolic resonance between the two, especially with regard to the use of freedom songs to encapsulate a radical message, will again be demonstrated in the next chapter where I will also discuss the extent to which peer educators' actions can be interpreted as resistance.

Each CPC performance, apparently a mere repetition of previous meetings, involves what performance theorists have termed "critical difference" (Drewal 1991 in James 1999: 37) and, like the *Vhusha* in Chapter 3, is newly created with every reproduction. For example, depending on where a performance is held, the composition of the audience can vary dramatically. Men in beer halls, women at clinics and both at taxi ranks react very differently to similar performances. The peer educators often persuade friends and family to come along for moral support, and this significantly changes the dynamics of a performance. Often, the *only* people in the audience are friends and family, who help the educators through the familiar motions of their performance, but at other times a small crowd gathers to watch the proceedings.

Moreover, the weekly content varies according to which zone leader has organised the performance. Some are known to be humorous, others to be serious and one in particular excels in overtly sexual innuendo. She encourages the educators to attract the attention of men by exaggerating their own sexuality to encourage male participation in

⁶⁵ There are two types of government condoms in South Africa; the "old" ones that come in a silver packaging and the newer "trust condoms" that come in a fashionable 8 pack with blue plastic wrapping and a recognizable trade mark on the front. Although "trust" condoms are clearly more popular due to the marketing that has been invested in them, they are smaller, thinner and much more likely to break during intercourse than the "old" silver brand, known in Venda beer halls as *masokisi* (socks). The female condom is also popular as it can be used without a man's knowledge, but demand regularly outstrips supply.

the performance. Under such guidance, songs such as *Jojo Tshilangano* (see next chapter) can take on overtly sexual characteristics. However, the extent to which this participation encourages men to accept the biomedical model of AIDS is unclear. Given that the package in which this model is wrapped is often one of titillation, they are often disappointed to discover that the educators were merely teasing them.

Or were they? Recent research has drawn attention to women's motivations for extra-marital or casual sexual relationships, showing that the construction of women as victims of survival strategies (cf. Wojcicki 2002) or as merely in pursuit of economic or emotional security is often inaccurate. Tawfik and Watkins (2007) make a timely reminder that women, even in circumstances of extreme poverty, are often active agents in defining their own sexuality and can be motivated by an array of incitements from passion to revenge for a partner's infidelity. Whilst structural considerations of the ways in which gender is constructed are important, we should not lose sight of the potential for agency in social and sexual encounters.

Although performance may in theory incorporate critical difference as mentioned above, the mode of delivery of these NGO-initiated sessions has become somewhat formulaic. Both performers and audience have begun to experience fatigue. This has played out on two levels: the audience can easily anticipate the familiar pattern of delivery and the educators get bored with delivering it. Although volunteers have suggested significant changes to the running order of public performances, these have not been permitted by CPC office staff, as they have a "legally binding contractual agreement with funders to provide a specific form of 'participatory' AIDS education."

Furthermore, generational authority and gender become salient markers of divergent group identity during the public performances. They distinguish the volunteers from the beer hall audiences that frequently consist of older men. In theory, to have a group of (ex)commercial sex workers performing AIDS education in beer halls where they previously operated makes some sense from the point of view of transforming sexual practice through peer example. In practice, however, a minority of the volunteers has a history of beer hall sex work. Most sex workers do not frequent beer halls until they are hidden by the darkness of night. The peer educators, by contrast, perform very early in the evening as most of them must return home by sunset to perform household chores.

The result is that a group of young women often perform to groups of older men who, in Venda, could not possibly be defined as their peers. For this reason, they are often verbally abused and occasionally rejected from the performance arena. On the other hand, when the public performances are held at clinics or market places, the balance between the educators and the audience is often more conducive to creating an 'enabling' environment in that more young women are likely to be present. Nonetheless, funding priorities stipulate that beer halls should be "targeted", and the volunteers are powerless to modify this to any significant extent.

As I suggested above, this may be related to a dependence on internally produced documents for the evaluation of projects, but it also points to a situation where a supposedly "bottom up" project is, in practice, orchestrated by the needs and expectations of those from the top down. The same argument can be made with regard to the confusion over recruitment of educators and the experimental inclusion of men. In this regard, funding priorities consistently take precedence over the content or efficacy of actual projects, and while the CPC office staff ensure their own regular salary, the volunteers "on the ground" are often left frustrated and experience a distinct lack of participation in project design or management. Indeed, as I now go on to explain, the wider experiences of being a peer educator are often in contradiction with what project designers may expect.

Experiences of Being a Peer Educator

The term "peer" in peer education projects can be misleading in a variety of ways. It is a highly ambiguous term, imposed by project designers who associate it with equality and high levels of social capital among trusted cohorts (cf. Campbell 2003: 51). However, with reference to an alternative usage of the term, James discusses peer pressure among Zulu adolescents around the time of sexual debut, arguing that "the egalitarian cosiness associated with peer education in an ideal context must surely be more frequently experienced as the duress of peer pressure in a less-than-ideal context" (2002: 172; cf. Wood *et al.* 1998). If notions of peer pressure speak to inequalities of power in the gendered construction of sexual identities, then we must pay due attention to the nature of the groups from which the peers are drawn. The evidence presented above demonstrates that the processes of volunteer recruitment in Venda have led to peer

education being conducted by a conglomerate of different groups of women from various sections of society.

As the vast majority of time outside of working hours is spent either performing domestic chores or at religious gatherings, Christian denomination is central to the construction of group identities both in Venda and throughout South Africa. As Garner (2000: 46) has noted, with over half of South Africans attending worship once a week or more, it is "one of the most 'churchy' countries in the world." In this way, the church an educator attends is likely to provide her most important peer group on a day to day basis.

This is apparent during the leisure time at weekly on-going training sessions. For example, without the co-ordinator's coercion to remain in their working zones, volunteers consistently sit down to eat in little cliques. The gossiping, eating, laughing, plaiting hair and resting on each other in a way that was quite different to the formalised behaviour of the zone group was suggestive of more genuine friendship networks from which the volunteers at each project were recruited. Those who ate together generally spent more leisure time together outside of working hours, and were members of the same social groups and religious networks. This was evidenced at family funerals every weekend, when the entire group was regularly called upon by the co-ordinator to assist with cooking and other tasks. Those who actually turned up to assist were generally members of the same church based cliques.

In one project alone, there were several clearly identifiable groups made up of members from the local Pentecostal, Apostolic and Roman Catholic congregations. In other projects there were small groups of "traditionalists" who did not attend any church, and whilst groups of royal women from the traditional leader's kraal maintained a certain superiority, their royal status was subsumed under church affiliation. At all projects, there were some women who mostly sat alone and did not seem to be part of any clique. They had been full-time sex workers, engaging in what Wojcicki (2005) has called survival sex, before joining the projects. They were stigmatized by the others for this previous lifestyle in which they openly, and desperately, sold sex in beer halls for subsistence. However this was never discussed openly, at least not in my presence. Conversely, it was this

latter group that received preferential treatment from CPC office and staff, especially during visits from funders who were keen to see “real prostitutes” in their projects.⁶⁶

The group memberships outside of peer education speak not only to present day alliances, but to historical trajectories through which patterns of religious affiliation seem to be particularly salient. It transpired through the collection of life histories that most peer educators who had been through stages of female initiation as they grew up were members of the Zionist/Apostolic churches. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these denominations of Christianity are highly syncretic and permit members of their congregations to participate in symbolic acts of initiation (*Vhusha ya Vhatendi* – lit. *Vhusha* of the believers). Some peer educators explained during interviews that their attendance at these churches was prompted in part by their wish to worship with other initiated women as well as, importantly, by its provision of the possibility for their own daughters to “be sung for”. By becoming initiated women in the church, they take an active part in the initiation of young girls. Through this they create and sustain hierarchies of authority within the wider church community. Although the secretive nature of initiation prevents them from discussing many details openly, they clearly take pride in their associations with and exhaustive knowledge of *mvelele* (culture). As the quote below demonstrates:

We, at the project [traditional dancing project], understand our responsibilities and respect our ancestors when they come to us to help. These days most people have forgotten these things, and you see now we have no jobs, and people are getting sick (Diary 8).

The several non-Christian cohorts were mostly recruited from networks associated with “culture industry” projects that promote traditional practices such as the one at Dopeni. These women are well known to be specialists not only in the arts of initiation and ancestral worship but also the *Malombo* possession ritual (*ngoma dza vhadzimu*). During *Malombo*, ancestral spirits (*Vhadzimu* sing. *Midzimu*) communicate with their living relatives during all-night dancing sessions through which therapeutic mediation of affliction is achieved (cf. Van Warmelo 1932: 141; Jansen 1992: 108; Blacking 1995a).

⁶⁶ It is very important to note here that different projects have very different group dynamics. At projects towards the Mussina border, for example, the majority of educators are engaged in full time beer hall sex work, and the recruits from Christian groups are in the minority. I only spent a few weeks at these projects and my data is drawn from projects deeper inside Venda that are not in such proximity to commercial centres or migration highways such as the N1.

Like the girls undergoing the *Vhusha* ceremony described in the previous chapter, the position of such peer educators is perhaps similar to that of the “salem pore girls” described by Blacking. They remain a significant minority of traditionalists who reject Christianity despite, or perhaps even in reaction against, the Christian majority.

In the peer education projects I worked with, members of African Independent Churches were in the majority (roughly 60%) compared with those who attended mission/mainline churches, who made up around 30% of the volunteers.⁶⁷ The mission Christians, in line with established literature on the subject, placed more importance on formal education and their fathers generally belonged to an established middle class of relatively wealthy migrant labourers, successful local farmers, teachers or civil servants (Cochrane 1986; De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2004; Egan 2007). The members of Zionist or Apostolic churches, on the other hand, exhibited markedly lower standards of educational achievement and had annual household incomes that reflected their lower economic status. Nonetheless, in terms of time and money, they donated more on a weekly basis to their churches than members of mission/mainline denominations.

Zionist and Apostolic congregations believe that possession can be the work of the Holy Spirit or the ancestors, and it is generally accepted that their convention of nocturnal dancing sessions (*mkuku* – to stamp the Devil back into the ground) is derived from, and open to, possession from the wider spirit world (Comaroff 1985; Naude 1995; Anderson 1999). The doctrine of mission denominations (mostly Lutheran), on the other hand, remains heavily influenced by the teachings of German missionaries: they have long defined traditional activities such as initiation and *Malombo* as unacceptable acts of pagan worship (Chapter 3; Kirkaldy 2006: 182). As such, and given the interview results above, the peer educators from these groups are prone to seeing their relationship with those in the AIC in terms of their modern and progressive lifestyles compared to the backward, less-Christian practices of others. This is clear in the quote below (translated from Tshivenda):

⁶⁷ See Chapter 3 for a definition of this taxonomy of Christian churches. These figures are taken from in-depth interviews with 96 peer educators between April and July 2004, and from 60 questionnaires distributed at different projects in 2003. The remaining 10% were either members of Pentecostal churches or non-Christian. Of course, at different projects some denominations are more common than others. The percentages are rounded off and should be used as a rough guide only as the labour turnover in projects is significant.

At Church last Sunday we were addressed by a Pastor from Pretoria. He was fantastic! He told us that we should only praise one God, and that he knows many people here in Venda continue to praise the dead. He read to us from the Bible that this is a great sin...and it is true, even the girls at the project [peer education] are doing it...They say they even make money from it (Diary 13).

These significant religious divisions influence directly the ways in which peer education is experienced by the volunteers. At the weekly on-going training, for example, important decisions about the Friday public performance must be made. These include decisions about who will lead a melody, change a song lyric or correct a dance routine. As arguments are usually settled through recourse to previous experience, those affiliated with AICs (and thus with more experience of traditional activities) take more responsibility for stage five, whilst those from mission churches with more experience of gospel and choral songs tend to take charge of organising stage two. Religious divisions that were formed outside of peer education thus provide a pragmatic division of labour within the projects. To be sure, members of these different groups harbour grudges, jealousies and suspicions about each other and although these feelings do not often come to the fore, their "backstage" presence is unstintingly acknowledged.

At one project, a Roman Catholic group openly accused members of the Apostolic Faith Mission church of poisoning them at the on-going training. Despite interventions from several office staff (and me) the matter was never fully resolved, and the volunteers remained suspicious of each other. Several of them left the project completely. Seen in this light, advocates of peer education in Venda can not reasonably claim to have achieved behaviour change through the "subjective judgements of close, trusted peers" (Wilson 2000). If this has been the case, then it has happened only at the micro-level of religious cliques and not of the group as a whole, or – for that matter – at the level of those exposed to the performances.

In this section I have argued that, among peer educators in Venda, there has been a lack of clarity employed when mobilising the notion of "peer" both in terms of group selection and audience participation. The implications of this are not necessarily such as to induce pessimism. Peer education has brought together divergent groups: the continued distinction between them is productive in that it provides for a division of labour in the projects. Nonetheless this has created volatile cliques which, based on religious

affiliation, represent more realistic peer groups. The divisiveness of religious separation potentially inhibits the overall efficacy of the project and calls into question the notion of a uniform and homogenous group of peers. Instead of conducting peer education within previously existing social networks, the CPC has attempted to smooth over differences between divergent social groups by creating a "one size fits all" scheme that leaves the "peer" in peer education a largely misleading term. I have identified pressure "from above" in the form of funding priorities as a major contributing factor to this, and argued that this impinges on the extent to which educators can participate in the processes of project design and implementation.

As the following section demonstrates, however, religious divisions, whilst important for understanding the group dynamics of peer education projects, should be seen in relation to wider affiliation with the NGO and, by extension, aspired-to association with the government. Becoming a peer educator presents the *potential* to create a new, upwardly mobile "self" in which religious affiliation does not play a defining role. In this context, we must re-evaluate the extent to which mission or African Independent Churches are markers of class in the post-apartheid dispensation, and consider the role of NGOs (especially those that are less "non-governmental" than others) in providing new opportunities for class mobility.

Peer Educators' Motivations

The somewhat simplistic notions of altruism and empowerment referred to above and explicit in most NGO participatory development material are inadequate in describing the reasons why volunteers join peer education projects. Indeed, a closer look at these motivational factors reveals fundamentally important aspects of the peer educator experience. In order to shed some light here, I start this section with two condensed career histories:

Career History One

Mulalo became a volunteer at the Ha-Rabali peer education project in 1998. She had been out of school and not working for some time, and heard about people doing voluntary work through a friend at Lutheran church. She went along and became a volunteer on the same day. Her favourite aspect of it at that time was the gospel singing and dancing as practice for public performances. In 2000 she was promoted to 'field support co-ordinator' and given responsibility for supervising several new projects – some of which were over 40 miles away. In late 2000 she

was 'contracted' by health promotion and research organization Horizons to be the 'outreach officer' for their farm worker intervention project at Doreen, on the Zimbabwe border. In 2002 having seen out the contract with Horizons, she moved back to the CPC to become the 'Peer Education Outreach Officer'. This put her in charge of co-ordinating and supervising all of the organisation's prevention programmes where she remains today.

Career History Two

Grace also joined the Ha-Rabali peer education project in 1998. Like Mulalo, she had heard about it through word of mouth and was already volunteering in several church based groups in her local branch of the ZCC. She had a real desire to make living conditions in Venda better in the post-Apartheid era, and joined in all the peer education activities with a passion. In 1999 she became a zone leader and then in 2000 she became co-ordinator of the project. With the award of a government lay counselling tender to the CPC, she successfully applied for one of the positions. She was instrumental in setting up the first support group for people living with AIDS (PLWA) at Siloam hospital in 2003 and then in 2005 she got a permanent position in the public sector as part of the management team in the clinic for PLWA at the same hospital.

The career histories above represent a well established pattern of employment opportunities for volunteers within the CPC. The first case of which I became aware in Venda was that of Mashudu, the original volunteer at the project, who now travels the world to give presentations at AIDS conferences as the Director of the CPC. That graduation through the ranks is aspired to by peer educators was demonstrated in the opening story of this chapter. Of the many dignitaries and key note speakers invited to attend the function, the most honorific slot (just before lunch) was given to a small group of ex-volunteers who had progressed into full time positions working as HIV/AIDS trainers in the local government municipality's Department of Public Works. The most rapturous applause was reserved for their presentation, and they spoke explicitly as to how the CPC had been a "stepping stone" for them, from poverty to security and into relative prosperity. In the eyes of current volunteers, these were classic examples of *real* peer educators since their positions had led them to find stable employment. This important pattern must be explained through other programmes co-ordinated by the CPC, such as the Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) and Home Based Care (HBC). A brief outline of their activities will serve to make the point.

Voluntary Counselling and Testing

The CPC was awarded a highly sought-after government tender (partly funded by Oxfam Australia) in late 2004 to provide VCT and facilitate support groups for people living with

AIDS in the Vhembe district.⁶⁸ This was part of a wider national government agenda to make HIV testing and ARV medication more accessible in rural areas, and also to provide more accurate HIV prevalence statistics which had previously been formulated only on the basis of pregnant women attending ante-natal clinics. The lay councillors, as they are known, receive a substantial monthly wage of R2,500 for which they work as quasi-nursing assistants on a 9-5 Monday to Friday basis. They undergo several weeks of government training and examination from which they receive official certificates and the title of lay councillor. As experienced volunteers, skilled in confidentiality and AIDS related knowledge, they are responsible for pre- and post-test counselling, performing HIV antibody tests, administering Nevirapine for the prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT), and running the 13 support groups for people with AIDS (in May 2005) at rural clinics and health centres. They cannot, however, administer antiretroviral medication, which is confined to selected larger hospitals and official pilot projects in the region.

Of the 56 lay councillors that were employed at over 30 rural clinics and health centres in May 2005, all but six were recruited directly from peer education programmes.

Home Based Care

The section of the CPC responsible for providing Home Based Care (HBC) works in partnership with the provincial government, church groups and PSG. The volunteers (almost 500 in May 2005 working with over 6,000 patients in 24 project sites) also attend a comprehensive "minimum standards" training course provided by provincial government and are subject to annual assessment in which their knowledge and skills are evaluated.⁶⁹ With 3 exceptions, all the CPC HBC volunteers are women, with an average age of 38 (in 2005), and receive a stipend of R1000 per month. (cf. Raman [2005] for an account of how men have been integrated into HBC activities).

There is a strong emphasis on "spiritual counselling" within HBC and almost all of the volunteers are recruited through a broad spectrum of local church networks. This is

⁶⁸ The other two organizations in the district to be awarded the tender were the Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa (PPASA) and Takalani Nama, an NGO for people living with AIDS in the Polokwane area.

⁶⁹ The content of national government minimum standards workshops for VCT and HBC were drawn up in close collaboration with the CPC project co-ordinators.

reflective of the existence of substantial pastoral care programmes undertaken by many churches throughout the Venda region. Home based care volunteers work closely with their respective churches, and generally conduct their daily business within these existing social groupings. For example, the project at Tshakhuma (see Map 4) has a strong connection with the local Catholic mission clinic and many of the volunteers are members of the congregation there. Indeed, Egan points out that Catholic churches have been pioneers in cooperative palliative care projects in rural South Africa (2007). At other projects, based on both other mission and AIC churches, the same kind of relationship between church membership and volunteer recruitment applies. Volunteers often use church meetings to request information about house-bound friends or relatives who are then visited by the HBC volunteers in the congregation. In an attempt to reduce the stigma attached to their actions, and in line with PSG instruction, HBC volunteers treat and care for *any* house-bound individuals, regardless of their affliction.

A trained HBC volunteer is qualified to prescribe and administer simple medication such as antibiotics and TB drugs, and in two pilot projects they work with Family Health International (FHI) to provide "palliative care" and assistance in the distribution of antiretroviral drugs to patients who have full blown AIDS. They are trained in pre- and post-test counselling but can not perform the HIV antibody test without the presence of a qualified nurse. Daily activities include praying with and washing clients, most of whom are bed bound with open sores, and delivering food and clothes parcels donated by various local and national charities.

Of fundamental importance to HBC volunteers is the ability to act surreptitiously and keep impeccable standards of confidentiality. It is extremely rare for clients to be open about their HIV status, and the frequent visits of CPC workers to a specific homestead can raise the suspicion of neighbours and lead to disastrous consequences for the family. This became apparent when a local journalist visited a HBC client posing as a photographer for a Johannesburg based charity. When the pictures and story appeared in the next copy of the *Mirror* newspaper under the headline "AIDS in Venda" the sick father was attacked before his house was burnt down, and the children were refused entry to their local school by an angry mob of parents and teachers. They fled the area and have not been seen since.

Thus, although HBC volunteers have recognisable uniforms and large bags in which to carry food parcels, Bibles and medication, they often work in casual clothes and take any provisions in an inconspicuous suitcase or cardboard box so that suspicious neighbours can assume that they are visiting relatives rather than "AIDS people" (see picture 4.4). As a volunteer approaches the client's homestead, they often greet them loudly using kinship terms such as "*malume!*" (uncle), or "*mazwale!*" (sister-in-law), pretending to be relatives who have recently returned from a visit outside of Venda. By working within the principles of established family networks in this way, HBC volunteers have developed webs of secrecy and trust through which they conduct their daily business. To some extent, due to the sensitive nature of their work, they have little option but to be surreptitious if they have the best interests of the client in mind. Nonetheless, their conventional methods of working keep rumour and (hopefully) disease stigma to a minimum for both the client and the carer. Clearly, in village settings where gossip is rife and living conditions are often claustrophobic, this level of deceit is an unsustainable method of gaining access to patients. It functions, however, as an initial diversion and makes the clients feel more relaxed with the visiting volunteers who, in time, can become more open about their true purpose if the situation is conducive.

Home based care groups provide another important example of career opportunities from within the ranks of peer education. As HBC was established from 1999/2000, the most promising and committed peer educators (who had often developed "close" relationships with various office staff) were selected as candidates for the positions as they already had basic HIV/AIDS training and were acquainted with the bureaucratic procedures of the CPC office. Of the 24 projects that were functional in 2005, every project co-ordinator had a career history of peer education.

In terms of the argument being made here, there was no recognisable pattern of religious affiliation amongst the educators who became lay councillors or home based care co-ordinators. Neither did earlier promotions to the position of zone-leader demonstrate any religious bias. These decisions were made by office staff (on a panel that included two board members) on the basis of career history, reliability and "potential to develop a career in public health". Of the 74 positions (50 lay councillors and 24 HBC co-ordinators), 29 of them were from mainline churches and 40 of them were from AIC denominations. The remaining 5 were either Pentecostal or non-Christian. Although this

appears unbalanced, it is quite consistent with the general pattern of religious affiliation within peer education projects (roughly 30% mainline and 60% AIC), and from this cursory use of statistics – with an accepted margin of error – it would appear that Christian denomination has little impact on the probability that a peer educator will progress towards full-time, stable employment.

This pattern of social mobility can be mapped onto wider trends of class formation in post-apartheid South Africa. Seekings and Nattrass (2006: 247) have suggested that we can stratify class position in South Africa into five broad categories, upper class (managers, professionals), semi-professional class (teachers, nurses), intermediate class (white collar, skilled, supervisory), core working class (semi- and un-skilled workers) and marginal working class (farm and domestic workers). Whilst they demonstrate that in the post-apartheid era there has been a rise in very visible African “middle” classes⁷⁰ that have benefited *inter alia* from governmental policies of Black Economic Empowerment, they also show that the main economic change since the 1990s has been a fall in formal employment (*ibid.*: 314).

It is difficult to fit peer education into this schema with any accuracy, but attempting to do so may put the data presented in this chapter into a wider context. Given that an overall trend in the post-apartheid era has been a marked rise in levels of unemployment (Daniel *et al.* 2005; Southall 2007) and that the few jobs that have become available have largely gone to the previously privileged (Seekings and Nattrass *ibid.*: 336) it is hardly surprising that unemployed, rural women such as peer educators are keen to grasp the opportunity for employment when it arises. Peer education would appear to provide a significant opportunity for “intragenerational” upward class mobility, i.e. that which occurs within the course of an individual’s lifetime (*ibid.*: 261). But from what, and to what?

The first question presents us with a problem in that to be a volunteer does not qualify for a position in the stratification suggested by Seekings and Nattrass. This may not be wholly fair in that, as we have seen, volunteers for the CPC receive a monthly stipend of between R500-1000. Domestic workers that I know in Thohoyandou do not receive much more than but would be counted as “marginal working class”. Moreover, the full-time

⁷⁰ They suggest that, relatively, these were a very privileged upper class but that models of class analysis are incapable of contextualising this adequately.

positions that peer educators have achieved in government programmes for voluntary counselling and testing, for example, seem to fall between semi-professional and intermediate classes. Whilst our categorisations can not be certain here, there can be little doubt that this represents a significant leap in class mobility that would appear to be all the more remarkable given the general context of endemic unemployment within which it is occurring.

This may help to contextualise the quotes (translated from Tshivenda) from peer educator diaries below in which this upward mobility (whether experienced or aspiration) is consistently expressed in terms of government, not NGO, employment (*muvhusoni* – lit. in the government):

When I came here [to the project] I thought it would be good to help other people because I was just lying around all day. My late mother always told me to keep busy, but as we all know there are no jobs here in Venda these days. Still it is good to help other people. In church and in town people now look at me and think that I am working for the government (Book D/4:33).

Before [I joined the project] I was drinking and just making money through men. It was not a good life before, but I hope that being at the project can help change that. Men can be so cruel, but when we love them [have sex] it is still nice. Things will be better when I get a 'real job' [*mushumu vhukhuma*]... yes, and I still would like to get married and have more children, I still feel so young (Book T/20:2).

I was really happy today to find people at my home waiting for condoms. They addressed me just like a nurse working at the hospital, and I gave them some and showed them how to use them (Book G/7:4).

I really wanted to make a change, to help people here in Venda. I want to be a nurse, and marry a doctor [she was joking here] maybe, and travel abroad...being a peer educator is good for us, but the money is not enough. How can I feed my children? It is just not enough (Book P/16:22/23).

Really, we were just selling our bodies, me and the others...we enjoyed it at times, getting gifts and going to the hotel...we all miss that but now we are trying to change it...these things are painful [to talk about] (Book O/15:10).

Clearly, the quotes above indicate that altruism and the desire to modify lifestyles are significant motivational incentives for some to volunteer. However, they also reflect the powerful desire to get onto a rung of the ladder of employment outlined in the career histories and through the examples of VCT and HBC. By no means are these two incentives to join mutually exclusive, indeed, when experienced together they may provide a compelling reason to become a peer educator.

This is expressed by the volunteer whose ambition is to change her lifestyle in order to “get a *real* job”. This suggests that for this woman the crucial factor, the ultimate destination, in becoming a volunteer is the ambition to progress through the ranks and find alternative, stable employment. “*Real*” peer educators, if they are successful, should get “*real*” jobs, and such opportunities exist in the public health sector. It is expected that this progression will be gradual with incremental promotions from volunteer to zone-leader, to co-ordinator then to lay councillor or other such positions. This upward social mobility is associated with a substantial increase in remuneration and elevation in status and authority. In other words, a central intention of becoming a peer educator is to *leave* the group from which they are deemed “peers” – to rise above it and “[to] acquire distance from, rather than being embedded more deeply in, an undifferentiated “community”” (James 2002: 183).

As James goes on to suggest, peer educators often feel more attached to the NGO they are working for than to any peer group. The evidence presented here indicates that this can be explained, at least partially, by the perception that volunteering is the first step to public sector employment. In the current economic climate where a small but rapidly rising and highly visible middle class is being funded largely by government contracts, it is hardly surprising that peer educators express a desire for governmental employment. The flattery of being recognised as a government employee, as a nurse or a quasi-social worker is thus welcomed and appreciated by peer educators. Given the recent history of successful CPC government tenders, they have every reason to believe that their ambitions may one day be fulfilled. With a relatively high labour turn-over brought on by the regular opportunities for promotion, peer education can be a competitive enterprise and the stakes are high.

This highlights contradictions between the desires of programme designers for long term, sustainable efficacy and the pragmatic ways in which the ANC-led government (through NGOs) has sought to train and employ as many rural unemployed people as possible. The government has been expected not only to create jobs, but also to provide training for the rural poor who were marginalised under apartheid. The policy of black economic empowerment has created a small, mostly urban elite, many of whom were part of the black middle class created under apartheid, but has done little to address the concerns of

those on the periphery. In this wider context, then, the frequent and expensive "workshops" through which HBC volunteers and lay councillors are trained and assessed on an annual basis are seen to some extent by the government as long term investments in the rural poor. It is hoped that the Department of Health will receive returns from this if, and when, volunteers progress into the public health care sector as nurses, councillors, trainers or HIV support workers. As the CPC director told me: "the government wants our volunteers to be career minded!"

This throws an element of doubt on the implicit assumption made by project designers that most peer educators will (want to) remain in the voluntary sector long enough to assist in the creation of "enabling contexts" for the promotion of health enhancing behaviour. It further suggests that, for peer educators in Venda, the notion of empowerment is understood more in terms of the individual social and financial benefits of getting a "real (government) job" in the public sector than it is in deriving "respect and recognition" for a voluntary role in promoting health (cf. Campbell 2000: 492), although the two are not unrelated. It could thus be argued that, in practice, peer education projects are more successful at improving the life chances of the few volunteers who join them than benefiting the "peers" with whom they allegedly renegotiate sexual identities.⁷¹

Conclusion

The main argument of this chapter has centred on the way in which religious divisions that form genuine "peer" groups in the projects are mediated, as opposed to exacerbated by, new opportunities for upward social mobility through affiliation with an NGO. I now highlight salient problems raised throughout this chapter and underscore the themes to be picked up in the next two. Firstly, the recruitment process of peer education has led to a situation that is far from ideal for a collective re-negotiation of sexual behaviour. The projects are divided into zones that do not reflect pre-existing social networks based on religious affiliation and thus provide barriers to group cohesion and effective "community

⁷¹ I have evidence to suggest that many peer educators have not led by example in using condoms, which has broad implications for the "creation of an enabling context". This data is very sensitive and I remain unsure of how to incorporate it here. It includes secrets told to me by men who have had illicit relationships with peer educators and is reflected in high rates of pregnancy among unmarried educators. Also not one peer educator has become open about their HIV status. This hardly creates an enabling context for others.

contact" based upon pre-existing connections. Home based care volunteers work more closely within their religious groups and use the networks of sociality that surround church life to their advantage. Clients participate through established relationships of domesticity and fictitious kinship, working with the extended family unit to assist in the care of a house-bound relative. Thus, as peer education projects attempt to traverse the boundaries between historically divergent social and economic groups, home based care projects work within religious and domestic arrangements that make efficacy a more likely outcome of their programmes.

As I will demonstrate in chapter 6, the importance of secrecy employed by the home based care volunteers should not be underestimated. HBC is relatively successful because of its discretion and use of existing networks and, as we shall see, the lack of these qualities in peer education contributes greatly to the difficulties experienced by the volunteers. By avoiding open, public conversation about AIDS, by treating house-bound clients regardless of their affliction, and by working under the guise of relatives, home based carers are able to avoid the suspicions of the wider public. As I will argue in Chapter 6, this is part of a process through which they construct "degrees of separation" in the negotiation of limited responsibility for "unnatural" death. In stark contrast to this, peer educators regularly exhibit their expert knowledge of HIV/AIDS in public, drawing attention to their fluency in biomedical discourse. The next chapter presents an analysis of this through a closer look at the music incorporated into public performances, and places this in the wider context of alternative musical interpretations of the epidemic which are rooted in the folk model that I introduced in chapter 3.

Chapter 4 Pictures



Picture 4.1: Peer educators at the Tshikombani project at the weekly on-going training.



Picture 4.2: Peer educators at the Ha-Dumasi project perform traditional dancing (from stage 5 of the public performance) to a visiting delegation from Project Support Group (PSG).



Picture 4.3: Facilitated "question and answer" session (stage 4 of the public performance) by the Tshikombani project, at a meeting held for teachers in a local school. The educator holds up a condom and asks the head-teacher (at the desk) "what is this?"



Picture 4.4: Head of home based care and the CPC, Betty Tshivhase, on a home visit in 2002. Note the lack of uniform and inconspicuous cardboard box.

CHAPTER 5

Singing Songs About AIDS: Biomedical and “Folk” Cosmologies in Stanza

The peer educators had already gathered in a group outside the Midway bottle store as I climbed out of the taxi and made my way through the barbed wire gates into the crowd of drinkers. It was late afternoon on a month-end Friday, and the usual mix of paying drinkers and thirsty beggars had taken up residence for the evening ahead. Slowly, the group of young women dressed in bright red skirts and smart polo shirts with ‘Prevention is Better than Cure’ on their backs formed a long line. In single file, holding on to the one in front in symbolic re-enactment of the famous Domba initiation python dance, they made their way through the crowd towards the main seating area next to the bar. The song that accompanied their intrusion into the men’s drinking session was based on the well known “struggle song” in praise of the ANC stalwart and previous Minister of Defence Joe “Ntae” Modise, and the echo of the peer educators singing in the sparse beer hall was a familiar melody. But the words had been changed, and different groups of men reacted with a combination of laughter, feigned shock, anger and indifference as they made out the new lyric; “Condom is the boss! It will protect you from illness!” I took a seat in the background next to some elderly men who seemed quite bewildered by the scene unfolding in front of them and within minutes they made excuses to leave. The well-rehearsed public performance by the peer educators quickly got into full swing, and their introductory drama about a man infecting his wife with HIV led into a facilitated question and answer session in which they were openly scorned by some, and tolerated by others. When a large wooden penis was produced to demonstrate how to fit a condom, it was snatched by a young man who used it as a prop in his own improvised drama, in which he selected a group of peer educators for an orgy to the hilarity of the crowd. One of the men who had left the table came back to collect his pouch of tobacco. “Why did you leave, isn’t this great entertainment?” I asked him amid the laughter. “Ah!” he replied, “ndi malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi, a si londa zwashu” (these are the illnesses of women, they are not our concern).

In the previous chapter I analysed the ways in which peer education has been adapted to HIV prevention in South Africa and the fluctuating social and economic dynamics this has given rise to. I now want to focus on the songs used in this enterprise and make a comparative analysis of them with those in other genres. This approach will allow me to assess the extent to which the biomedical model has interacted with alternative understandings of the HI virus, and the implications of this for people’s understandings of the epidemic. The specific focus on songs is not arbitrary; nor is it simply a result of the widespread use of musical performance in Venda peer education. Rather, it reflects

explicit concerns of the peer educators who “sing about what [they] cannot talk about” (Ene Tshikosi notes 33/2). The complex reasons that explain the peer educators’ perception that they cannot talk about AIDS draw together many of the themes raised in this thesis, and will be the subject of the following chapter. My current concern, however, is with the analysis of their songs.

Performance as the “Tip of an Iceberg”

The peer educators’ claim that they sing about what they cannot talk about struck me as familiar. It resonates with anthropological approaches that suggest performance may allow people to say things they would not otherwise be able to articulate and thus provide access to what Vail and White have called ethnography from “within” and history “from below” (1983: 887; cf. Vail and White 1990). Thus the analysis of musical performance can grant the anthropologist “privileged access to layers of consciousness that are normally not available to scholarly examination” (Erlmann 1991:12). In this vein, Fabian (1990: 12-13) has suggested that performance is “the tip of the iceberg of culture floating in a sea of history and consciousness”.⁷² Fabian’s important ethnography was inspired by Turner’s earlier theoretical concern with plays, ritual and festivals, which he argued must be read as more than mere enactment, and analysed in terms of the generation of new symbols and meanings (1982). Fabian builds on this to construct a notion of “performative ethnography” through which anthropologists can understand culture (in this case Shaba-Swahili) not only through interpretation of a set of symbols but through enactment and performance. Such an approach is intended to facilitate the reading of forms of knowledge that are not expressed in discursive statements, but which find their way into the public domain through alternative action such as performance (1990: 6).

In the South African context, both Ermann (1996) and Coplan (1994) have provided exemplary accounts of how performance can represent the “tip of an iceberg”. Moreover they demonstrated Kaarsholm and James’s later claim that the performance of popular culture “enable[s] people to engage with present difficulties in a creative manner”

⁷²Fabian and Erlmann here use “consciousness” to refer to the active process in which human actors deploy historically salient cultural categories to construct their self awareness (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987).

(2000:198). Coplan's analysis, for example, does this by looking at sung and spoken poetry, the active role of writing and performing this "Sefela" in the construction of working class Basotho migrant consciousness, and how this shapes the agency through which a migrant makes life choices in the face of the structural constraints and expectations around him. The historically salient transition from herd boy to heroic male through the course of one's travels is at once remembered and reconstructed by the active, and apparently simultaneous, process of *Sefela* composition and performance.

Erlmann's account of *Isicathamiya* demonstrates migrant Zulu males' musical performance as resistance: an ongoing "form of struggle" (Erlmann 1996:xix). By intensely querying the dominant power relations of the oppressive social and political order under Apartheid, the performers propose an alternative ideal type social order and attempt to fuse the oppressive structural relationships of their immediate environment with positive meaning by replicating its competitive logic on a smaller and more manageable scale in *Isicathamiya* performances and competitions. For Erlmann, the genre thus attempts to return coherence into a world that has been shattered beyond their control by singing critically about the alienation of migrant life, of concern for domestic cohesion and a loosening of patriarchal authority, contained in musical and choreographic arrangements which the performers are in control of.

Erlmann thus suggests that performance does not merely respond to or reflect social relationships, but is "in its self a form of realistic praxis that asks questions about society" (1996: 242). Performance constitutes the search for an autonomous social and political sphere, a space that in reality the performers are without. Through a combination of the approaches taken by Fabian, Coplan and Erlmann, it is clear that performance must be understood in terms of a created space that connects notions of the past and the present, through which new ideas are spun and contested.⁷³ My analysis of musical performance takes this well established literature as a point of departure, and through an account of the songs and social processes involved in singing about AIDS, I will attempt to reveal that which lies below the iceberg's tip in Venda.

⁷³ See James (1999), Muller (1999), Gunner (1991) and Meintjes (2003, 2004) for further examples of musical performance in South Africa as historically constituted social practice, and Vail and White (1983) for an example of this in Mozambique.

Much has been written about the pervasive culture of performance in Venda. Primarily through the work of John Blacking, the region has become famous in ethnomusicological circles with seminars, conferences and edited volumes making consistent reference to the area and to his work there (cf. Byron 1995; Reily 2006). Blacking's research covered almost every social, political and aesthetic aspect of musical performance in Venda. He mapped the many different genres onto specific stages in the progression of a calendar year such as the performance of *Malende* party songs after harvest and working songs (*dzinyimbo dza davhani*) during the sowing season (1965: 30). Blacking's work also stressed the connections between musical repertoire and an individual's life cycle, such as children's songs (1967), those of female initiation (1969: a-e) and in relation to traditional political power in the region through the *Tshikona* (1965: 37). In this way, he demonstrated that music has a central role to play in the designation of fixed social positions and that musical performance is central to the ways in which people in Venda recognise and maintain social difference and deference to the hierarchical order upon which power is based.

But Blacking's Venda material also revealed his "view of music as having an almost heroic capacity to alter the world" (James 2006: 74; cf. Erlmann and Coplan above). It is this aspect of Blacking's work, the conviction that music can embody "resilience in the face of oppression", that has made a lasting impact on ethnomusicology in the region, becoming almost "conventional wisdom" (James 2006: 74). Blacking mostly developed this theoretical angle in *How Musical is Man* (1973) in which he argued for the innate musical capacity of humans and the mystical potential of that music to effect positive changes among those who performed it. This has become the most widely read and influential of Blacking's work. In the analysis of songs that follows, I draw on this theoretical legacy between music's dual role as a conservative force for equilibrium and a radical force for change as it demonstrates well the dynamics that lurk below the lyrical content of contemporary music performances. However, whilst I will demonstrate that music can indeed play an ambiguous role in various social settings, the analysis will not be constrained by such a dualistic observation, but informed by it.

I begin by presenting songs from peer education projects. As I have recorded almost 200 of these over several years, this will necessarily be a condensed selection, but it is representative of the four categories into which peer educators group their music;

church songs, struggle songs, traditional songs and originals. I will demonstrate that, when looked at in isolation as a group of "peer educator songs", they reflect the new-found positive identity of quasi-social workers, fluent in the nuances of biomedical discourse and fluctuations in government policy that we saw in the previous chapter. Moreover, the combination of politically motivated songs of struggle, church and tradition serves, in culturally appropriate ways, to laminate this new content together with existing melodic and dance patterns with which the general public are familiar. Without any convincing evidence, however, project designers, funders and NGO "experts" assume that this hybridising strategy will contribute to behavioural change in the target population, and that such songs are a powerful force for change in an environment where open conversation about HIV/AIDS can have far reaching and potentially counter-productive consequences.

However, peer educators are not the only people in Venda who sing songs about AIDS. As well as groups of young women, individual male instrumentalist/singers have also taken up the topic. In the second half of this chapter I present an analysis of a song by the *Tshilombe* guitarist Solomon Mathase. In his song, *Zwidzumbe*, (Secrets), Solomon provides an insight into the ways in which HIV/AIDS and peer educators have been incorporated into the Venda folk model of sexually transmitted diseases. This serves a dual purpose in my analysis. Firstly, it allows me to demonstrate that targeted interventions such as female peer education further stigmatise the group already thought by many to be responsible for spreading the virus; this involves considering the ways in which biomedicine has been incorporated into Venda aetiology of sexual health.

Secondly, the comparison between peer education songs and *Tshilombe* interpretations of HIV/AIDS has important implications for the emerging sub-discipline of "medical ethnomusicology" (Barz 2006: 59) through which Barz has recently sought to explain the efficacy of "AIDS songs" in Uganda. The current analysis suggests that an AIDS-inspired medical ethnomusicology, whilst useful, must not privilege – as Barz does – musical offerings that are based on biomedical formulations to the exclusion of those that are not. To do so omits a central part of the puzzle; that which is below the tip of the iceberg and indicative of the social and cultural milieu within which musical interventions operate, and is thus fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of how songs might – or might not – affect patterns of sexual behaviour.

The comparison with Mathase's *Zwidzumbe* illustrates that a critical understanding of the role played by music in AIDS interventions must include a consideration of competing (and possibly more authoritative) interpretations, within which the biomedical model can be incorporated and ascribed quite different meanings. In conclusion, I will argue that the songs of peer educators do indeed demonstrate clearly the role of musical performance in the negotiation of a more positive "alternative reality" (Erlmann 1996), a multi-faceted and ultimately more employable identity. However, other songs in the region demonstrate that AIDS and the processes of peer education have been framed in divergent, often contradictory ways and that any new-found identity must be qualified by this wider, heterogeneous context.

The Songs of Peer Educators⁷⁴

Following principles learned at various CPC/Department of Health workshops, peer educators endeavour to keep any new lyrics as simple as possible. They practice cyclical repetition of "call" (*u sima* – to plant) and "response" (*u bvumela* – to thunder) vocal parts, broken down into complex arrangements of harmony. In keeping with a general principle of all CPC music, programme designers hope that a receptive audience will learn the simple lyrical adaptations and participate in the singing through prior knowledge of the melodic shifts. They have succeeded, but only to a very limited extent; the tactic works especially well when a weekly performance is held in a clinic or other female space. But the public response to peer education songs does not always end in participation. Audience reactions range from shock or amusement to discomfort and, occasionally, outright anger.

The list of songs that I now outline – with contextual background – represents a cross-section of peer education music and I move onto their analysis directly after this summary.

⁷⁴ In order that the reader can listen to the songs whilst reading about them, (and with the exception of songs 2, 3 and 11) the songs discussed in this chapter can be heard on the accompanying CD. Please note that because of the inclusion of *Tshikona*, *Domba* and *Vhusha* songs from previous chapters, the track numbers on the CD do not correspond with the song numbers in this chapter. See Appendix A for details.

Church Songs

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, religious affiliation is an important characteristic, and hence indicator, of socially embedded groups from which peer educators are constituted. Not surprisingly, church songs are used throughout weekly on-going training sessions for opening and closing prayers, and for the blessing of food. Different groups thus bring the songs and melodies from their Sunday worship into the peer education arena. They either present an adaptation they have written themselves, or work with their zone-group to find alternative lyrics that can encapsulate succinctly biomedical notions of HIV, AIDS, treatment and prevention. As I suggested, the micro-politics of these sessions can reveal tensions and alliances that are concealed beneath the wider identity of peer educators.

During public performances, many people in the audience associate church songs with sacred spaces and see their secularisation as blasphemous. However, the peer educators are acutely aware of this, even regarding it as a point in the songs' didactic favour:

When we are busy singing these songs from church, some people [laughing] they can be getting very cross with us. Even my auntie, she told me she was not happy about us doing it like this. It's like we are stealing from them, or laughing at Jesus, but we say No! They should be blessing us because isn't it that the Bible says 'God is Love', and how can you love if there is no life?! Really, if people are getting shocked then we think that is good! They must just get tested and just use condoms (Grace interview t2:s1:tc40-50).

Song 1: *Vho i vhonna naa?* – Can you see it?

Leader:	<i>Ahee, Vho i vhonna naa?</i> <i>Ahee, Vho i, Nevarapini a vhonna naa?</i>	Hey! Do you see it? Hey! Do you see Nevarapine? Nevarapine?
Chorus:	<i>Ahee, Vho i vhonna naa?</i>	Hey, do you see it? (Repeated throughout)
Leader:	<i>i thusa nwana wa vhone</i> <i>Uri ha bebw i a si na tshitshili</i>	It helps your child that it is born without the virus

Song 2: *i ya vhulaya* – It Kills.

Leader (one line, then echo by chorus)

*Ndi tshitshili i yo no fhirele / It is a virus that goes through/past you
kha muthu a renatho / and goes from and to another
are natho, a renatho / one to another, one to another,
a hona mushonga / with no medicine
u bva tshikhuwa kana wa thsirema / from white or black medicine
mushonga ndi lufu / the only cure is death.*

*mufumakhadzi wa muimana / the pregnant woman
a nga pfukisela kha nwana / will pass it to her child
a ro vha na AIDS / and the child gets AIDS*

Chorus (echo throughout):

*HIV, AIDSE, *i ya vhulaya, i ya vhulaya* / HIV, AIDS, it kills, it kills.*

Song 1, I was told, is an adaptation of a ZCC song, prevalent in much of eastern Venda, although I heard the melody being sung by a group of villagers protesting against police inefficiency in a ritual murder trial in 2000 which suggests that it may also be associated with the struggle.⁷⁵ Of course, these are not mutually exclusive possibilities. A church version is known as *Vho vhavhonna Murena naa?* (Do you see the Lord?) and is performed by peer educators with the characteristic “stamp dancing” that, as we saw previously, accompanies much of the ZCC musical repertoire (cf. Comaroff 1985: 244-245).

In song 1 (like in song 14), the peer educators are appealing directly to pregnant women (*muimana* plu: *vhaimana*), informing them that Nevarapine is freely available at clinics, and that it can help prevent mother to child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV. At the time of recording, in May 2004, the government had recently made a commitment to the provision of PMTCT medication to all HIV positive pregnant women and rape survivors (see Chapter 4).

⁷⁵ This demonstration was in the Mukombani area of Venda. King Kennedy Tshivhase made an appearance on the front line of the protest when police threatened to shoot at the crowd. According to the *mirror* newspaper, he exclaimed that the police should “Rather shoot the king of Venda than any of his subjects!” Again, this was a shrewd publicity stunt in the strategy to gain legitimacy with sections of the citizenry in his quest to become paramount king, and it was widely covered in the press.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, Department of Health representatives and non-governmental actors at the regional and local levels often demonstrate significant independence from the President's dissidence, and they do not always share the eccentric notions of the Minister of Health. The information passed down to peer educators thus consists of conventional biomedical knowledge on HIV/AIDS and reflects the post-2003 situation, in which a relatively progressive government policy allows for free provision of ARV to every HIV positive person with a CD4 count below 200; as the peer educators sing in song 4 below, "we use drugs, these days".

As can be seen from song 2 (recorded in 1998 before the 2003 AIDS policy shift) the CPC did not, previous to government provision of these drugs, assume a role in advocacy or lobbying. Such a role was, and is, taken by social movements and pressure groups such as Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and National Association of People Living with AIDS (NAPWA), which have very limited activities in the Venda region and rarely make contact with the CPC. The CPC, and thus the songs of the peer educators, have been reflective of existing government policy rather than influencing it: they have advertised services and medicine as these gradually became available through the national "roll-out" of AIDS treatment. This NGO's slowness to speak out and tendency to endorse existing policy must be understood in the context of the comfortable relationship between regional government and the CPC office staff, as discussed in the previous chapter. From the mid/late 1990s to the early years of the new millennium, the focus of peer educator songs has thus shifted in line with government policy: from prevention to the promotion of voluntary counselling, testing and treatment.

Song 3: Condom is Number one!

Church Lyrics (sung in English)

Leader: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus is number One
Chorus: No matter what the people say, but Jesus is number one (repeat)

CPC Lyrics:

Leader: Condom, Condom, Condom is number one (repeat)
Chorus: No matter what the people say, but condom is number one (repeat)

This song, I was told, is the adaptation of a very popular Lutheran gospel song, performed during church services as an upbeat, short chorus. The peer educator version exemplifies the attempt to keep lyrical changes to a minimum without compromising on effectiveness. This simple but striking change is employed as a shock tactic, in line with the quote above.

Song 4: 'Daraga' (drugs – ARV)

Leader:	<i>Ri shuma daraga maduvha ano, ri shuma madarada maduvha Ee, Ahh!</i>	We use drugs (ARV), these days, we use drugs, these days, oh!
Chorus:	<i>Daraga maduvha ano, iyo weah! (x3) ri shuma madaraga maduvha ano</i>	Drugs, these days, oh! we use drugs, these days
Leader:	<i>Vha tshi ha-Lufule vha do i wana Vha tshi ha-Siloam vha do i wana</i>	You will get it at Lufule [clinic] You will get it at Siloam [hospital] ⁷⁶

This is an adaptation of another very popular choral song used by several church groups throughout Venda. It is usually performed in Shangaan, and most versions of it are reportedly sung to celebrate changes in the seasons, or at christenings or weddings when a significant life-cycle rite of passage is being undergone by members of the congregation. In the peer education version on the CD, it was being rehearsed for a public performance, and the leader changes in the middle of the rendition. The church songs used in peer education thus combine elements of "mission" with AIC Christianity, and in different areas they fluctuate in popularity to reflect the demographic dynamics of divergent projects.

Struggle Songs

Their musical repertoire, however, is not limited to or defined by church groups. Peer educators also modify songs that are associated with political activity against apartheid.⁷⁷ Struggle or freedom songs have recently been described as:

⁷⁶ See maps for Lufule and Siloam; at the time the clinics in these areas were participating in pilot studies for the ARV "roll-out".

⁷⁷ The role that music played in the struggle was recently commemorated in the excellent SABC documentary "Amandla! – A revolution in four-part harmony" (BMG South Africa 79102-21510-2).

[S]hort slogans...set to simple melodic phrases, sung *a cappella* (unaccompanied) and repeated over and over in a call and response style. They are created and sung collectively, and frequently modified as politics, attitudes and circumstances change, and are almost exclusively non-commercial (Gilbert forthcoming: 426).

Moreover, they are “ubiquitous but largely informal and un-professionalised” (*ibid.*: 423) and currently constitute a dominant medium of popular political expression throughout South Africa. Although reference to these songs is scarce in the existing literature on South African music, they are clearly related to the originally Zulu *Isicathamiya* genre (Erlmann 1996) and, like it, are descended from pre-struggle church music. They are also strongly derivative of, and arguably an example of, the *makwaya* (choir) genre (James 1999, 2006: 155) that has stylistic origins in the combination of “southern African singing traditions with Christian hymnody” (Glibert *ibid.*: 426).

These songs remain hugely popular within South Africa, and Gilbert points to their “cultural” use in the construction of ANC propaganda outside South Africa during the struggle years (she uses the term culture to refer to artistic activity and not, as I have in chapters 2 and 3 as synonymous with tradition). Thus music, literature, graphic art, dance and theatre were “actively recruited to promote the anti-apartheid struggle internationally” (*ibid.*: 422). These songs, and the culture of which they were a part, grew to be central to ANC policy during the struggle. An official project (Amandla Cultural Ensemble) was established, and soldiers who were talented singers, actors, and performers, were deployed there to be “cultural workers”. As Gilbert has demonstrated, a considerable number of their songs made reference to ANC leaders like Luthuli, Thambo, Sisulu and especially Mandela, “honouring their leadership and calling for political guidance” (*ibid.*: 435).

The sole purpose of this was to send out a political message, and encourage collective political action (Nolwin 1996). Given the historical context and explicit political critique inherent in this music, it is perhaps not surprising that until the un-banning of the ANC in 1990, they remained illegal, were primarily an oral form, and were only (officially) recorded outside of South Africa. Some recordings, such as song 5, are kept in the archives of Radio Freedom: the ANC station when it was still underground and broadcasting from Ethiopia, Zambia, Angola, Tanzania and Madagascar. The music of

many other black and coloured South African artists who recorded on record deals outside the country reached black listeners in South Africa in a similar fashion over the air-waves of Radio Freedom or through a bustling trade in contraband.

Although the purveyors of many genres such as jazz, reggae, gospel, choral and some traditional music were actively engaged in challenging the policies of segregation, the struggle songs in question were distinct in several ways. Chief among these was the accompanying “*toyi toyi*” dance that grew to symbolise the preparation for warfare (McGregor 2005). During the apartheid era, the lyrical content of struggle songs was highly politicised and extensively aggressive. An example I provide here (which can be heard on the CD) from the Radio Freedom archives, has a threatening message for the political leaders of the apartheid era homelands. The chanting comrades exchange Mangosuthu (“Gatsha”) Buthelezi, previous head of the KwaZulu homeland, for other leaders of the puppet regimes such as (Patrick) “Mphephu” in Venda and (Lennox) “Sebe” in Ciskei, and prophesize their rendezvous thus:

Song 5: Hey, Wena Gatsha⁷⁸

<i>Hey wena Gatsha</i>	<i>Hey you, Gatsha</i>
<i>Amasi abekwe elangeni</i>	It's only a matter of time
<i>Sodibanda</i>	we shall meet
<i>Ngebazuka</i>	with a bazooka

As if to exemplify Blacking's concern for the dual capacity of music, however, official productions at the same time by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), were equally agitprop and ideological, but were concerned explicitly with the promotion of racial segregation, explicitly concerned with depicting black people as country-dwellers rather than townsmen (James 1997) and thus in support of the political *status quo*. Through stations on the state-controlled broadcaster such as Radio Thohoyandou in Venda, local artists (largely motivated by instant cash payments for which they relinquished copyright) recorded in the SABC studios and tailored their lyrical content to

⁷⁸ The version was recorded by Canadian journalists at ANC headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1985 and later appeared as track 7 on the commemorative Radio Freedom CD (Rounder Records USA 11661-4019-2).

banal love songs with essentialist, nationalist sentiments such as that expressed in song 6, in a genre that became known as “radio jive”.

Song 6: *Ndi a Tuwa* (I am Going)⁷⁹

<i>Thi dzuli Makuwani,</i>	I don't live in Johannesburg
<i>ndo da fhano nga mushumo</i>	I just came here to work
<i>Ndo da u shumela musadziwanga</i>	I came to work for my wife
<i>Ri a tuwa, hayani Venda</i>	We are going, home to Venda.

A vast and previously unreleased collection of these recordings was recently released as the *African Renaissance* series – showcasing the ways in which government propaganda at the time combined the recording of popular music with traditional pieces that were designed to create a longing for “home”. As Hamm (1987) has argued, however, radio jive had genuine popular support amongst urban-based Africans who reinterpreted its intended agitprop agenda, and to some extent this section of the populace dictated the choice of music broadcast by the SABC on their own terms (James 1997).

Songs of the struggle, then, existed illegally in relation to strict state regulations over what could, and could not, become popular music. They accompanied illegal political rallies and demonstrations. The recognised experts in leading them were groups of ANC members, especially the youth league and MK soldiers in training, or their commanders such as the late Peter Makoba who championed the “one settler, one bullet” slogan through the genre. Thus struggle songs were illegal, but they were, and are, hugely popular. However as a result of the lack of recordings, they circulated largely in formats that were not standardised and the lyrics changed depending on the leader. The versions aired on Radio Freedom would be re-invented in different languages throughout the country. After 1990, this began to change. Record companies such as BMG started making commercial recordings and artists such as Amaqabane, Blondie Makhene and various African church choirs began to produce standardized versions with synthesized backing instrumentation.

⁷⁹ Performed by Tshigwada Tsha Toronto. On *African Renaissance* Vol.2: Venda. (Eagle Records SABC002 GAS 0000002 SAB)

Given that contemporary Venda remains an ANC stronghold, such songs often become part of the entertainment at public gatherings during and after local ANC ward meetings when they are sung in praise of old and new comrades. They regularly form part of beer drinking/meat eating repertoires through which men remember the past and comment on the present. Nonetheless, they are more widely associated today with general protests, and might be performed by groups of women presenting a petition to parliament in anger at the extent of sexual violence or by students protesting against “*muti*-murders”.

The considerable influence that struggle songs had in the past has thus to some extent been brought into the post-apartheid political arena in which they are used both in praise of and in anger against the ANC-led government. It is in this context that peer educators attempt to harness the power associated with them by utilising the genre in public performances. As one said:

[T]he struggle is not yet over. We are still struggling, can't you see?! It is not enough that we can vote, but voting is important. My house remains without water and I still cook on a fire at night. Anyway, now AIDS is the enemy, it kills us secretly just like the Boer used to, and we should fight it [AIDS] as we did before with the Boer (f/w diary – Mme a Mapule).

The song below, for example, is an adaptation of a very famous struggle song in praise of ANC comrade Joe “*ntate*” (father) Modise and other heroes of the struggle. A standardized recording was released in 1990 by the band Amaqabane. As can be heard on the CD, the four syllables of the opening line “Nta/te/ Mod/ise/” are replaced by the peer educators with the four syllables in “/condomu/ ndi /bosso/”. It is performed with variations on these themes, in verses, with the call and response differing depending on the leader. In 2005, peer educators were unaware of the recorded version but were encouraged to modify the song initially by Albert, the original volunteer and a previous commander of the military wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*.

Song 7: 'Condomu Ndi Bosso!': Condom is the Boss!

Leader:	<i>Condomu ndi bosso!</i>	Condom is the boss!
Chorus:	<i>Ndi bo...</i> <i>Ndi bosso</i> <i>Ndi bosso, condom ndi bosso.</i>	<i>It is...</i> <i>It is the Boss</i> <i>The boss, condom is the boss.</i>
(x2)		
Leader:	<i>i thivhela malwadze.</i>	<i>It shields us from sickness.</i>
Chorus:	<i>Malwa..</i> <i>Malwadze..</i> <i>Malwadze a vhudzekani.</i>	<i>sick...</i> <i>sickness</i> <i>sexually transmitted sickness.</i>
Leader:	<i>Condomu nga shume.</i>	<i>Condoms are here to be used.</i>
Chorus:	<i>Nga shu...</i> <i>Nga shume,</i> <i>Nga shume, Condom nga shume.</i>	<i>to be...</i> <i>to be used</i> <i>to be used, condoms to be used.</i>
Leader:	<i>Condomu ndi ngwena.</i>	<i>Condoms are crocodiles.⁸⁰</i>
Chorus:	<i>Ndi ngwe...</i> <i>Ndi ngwena</i> <i>Ndi ngwena, condom ndi ngwena.</i>	<i>it's a croc...</i> <i>it's a crocodile</i> <i>a crocodile, condoms are crocodiles.</i>

Song 8: AIDSE

Leader:	<i>AIDSE!/(x3)</i>	AIDS!
Chorus:	<i>i ya vhulaya (x2)</i> <i>i ya vhulaya, e Aidse</i>	<i>It is killing</i> <i>It is killing, this AIDS</i>
Leader:	<i>Kha ri luge</i>	<i>let's get ready</i>
Chorus:	<i>Kha ri luge Afurika,</i> <i>i thivhela, e Aidse.</i>	<i>let's get ready, Africa</i> <i>To prevent this AIDS.</i>
Leader:	<i>ARV! (x3)</i>	antiretrovirals
Chorus:	<i>i ya dzidzivha...(x2)</i> <i>i ya dzidzivhadza thshitshili</i>	<i>It knocks out...</i> <i>It knocks out the virus</i>

⁸⁰ The crocodile is a symbol of chieftainship, and of incontestable strength.

Song 8 has reportedly had multiple incarnations, and is associated with different activities by various groups throughout Venda. The peer educators mostly recalled it as a funeral song sung by women in the Mphephu era although I did not hear it at any funerals during fieldwork. Others contradicted this and argued that it was an MK song, sung by soldiers asking God to bless them and their families, who were left behind in South Africa while the comrades underwent training in neighbouring countries. Despite this contestation, struggle songs constitute an important aspect of peer educators' arsenal and, as can be heard on the CD, the emotion with which they are performed is a stark reminder that freedom is a recent acquisition and that AIDS threatens to destroy it.

Traditional Songs

As Chapter 2 demonstrated, the concept of "tradition" is fraught with ideological pitfalls and has been used and abused throughout the recent history of South Africa. Still, this is the word used by peer educators to describe the stage in a public performance when they use a *murumba* drum.⁸¹ The performance of traditional songs at weekly public performances, as we saw in the previous chapter, is important in many respects. Most obviously, they provide the occasion for audience participation with impromptu solo dances (*maluselo*) that go on until the dancer has out-shone the previous soloist or accepted that they can not.

The potential repertoire of traditional songs is connected to and restricted by the classification of communal Venda music into genres performed by men, women, adults and children (see Stayt 1931; Blacking 1965). As mostly young to middle-aged women, peer educators use a combination of *Malende* (sung by men and women at beer drinks and for general entertainment at various occasions), *Vhusha*, *Domba* (from the female initiation schools – see chapter 3), *Tshifase* (a courting dance for teenagers) and *Tshigombela* (young girls/women's entertainment; cf. Kruger 1999).

Although several peer educators also dance *Malombo/Ngoma dza Midzimu* (lit. the drum of the ancestors – a Turnerian ritual of affliction) at fairly regular intervals in their private lives, no songs from this appear in the CPC repertoire. This is perhaps puzzling to some extent in that *Malombo* is explicitly concerned with the social, personal and

⁸¹ The *Murumba* drum is used as it is symbolic of female initiation and is used in the rites of *Vhusha* and *Domba*, as described in Chapter 3.

metaphysical processes of healing (Blacking 1995a). It is part of the complex of healing/possession rites that occur throughout central and southern Africa known as *Ngoma*, documented by Janzen (1992), van Dijk *et.al* (2000) and more recently West and Luedke (2005). Drews (2000) provides an analysis focusing on gender dynamics in *Ngoma* to demonstrate that, like peer education, *Ngoma* rites are often dominated by female participants. And yet despite this historical female dominance and an association with healing, *Malombo* music does not feature in CPC AIDS education.

Although there is considerable evidence of hybridization between traditional and Christian religious practices, especially in African Independent Churches as discussed previously, *Malombo* remains taboo even for most Zionist or Apostolic Christians in Venda. Those who perform it are members of a very specific social and spiritual group of which membership is achieved only through experience of possession and thus from being healed of a specific affliction. Only once a person has been possessed (o wa - lit. to have fallen) will she (or, increasingly he [Rezacova 2007]) be called upon to assist in the next *Malombo*.⁸²

The taboo attached to *Malombo* and those who perform it, usually identifiable by a copper bracelet (*mulinga*) around a wrist, has prevented it being used in AIDS education as the Christian majority of peer educators simply would not be associated with it in public or private form. Moreover, the few educators who do take an active role in possession dances recognised its role in healing, but would not perform it "out of context". The ritual arena in which *Malombo* is danced must be carefully prepared and adequately protected with *mushonga* (medicine), and to invoke possession without this would quite literally risk the wrath of the ancestors. In this way, the non-optative nature of *Malombo* music renders it unsuitable for the objectives of peer education. For the peer educators, this is self evident: as a form of treatment for affliction, its worth is measured via its efficacy more than by its aesthetic appeal and of all the genres

⁸² Over the years I have been lucky enough to attend many *Malombo* dances under the instruction of Noriah at Dopeni. She went to great pains to ensure that I had accurate data on the various stages, costumes and objects used throughout the possession. She talked me through the 3 stages (*Tshele*, *Malombo*, *U kwasha tshele mavhidani*) several times, and permitted my access to the "spirit house" from which the mysterious noises and shadows of the ancestors rest and eat during the period of their brief incarnation into human bodies. Late in the evening during a *Malombo* in June 2004, a spirit who was known to be partial to the traditional beer from a specific *shebeen* in a neighbouring village, stole the drum stick (*tshiombo*) and ran off into the night to drink there. It was not until 6.30 the next morning that he returned, drunk, for the rites to be completed.

mentioned here it is the least likely to transcend its context and be used for anything else besides its original purpose.

The same can not be said, however, for songs from the various stages of female initiation. Although they are intimately associated with ancestors (*Midzimu*) in many ways, this is to some extent countered by the ways in which they constitute the more neutral (and recently fashionable) notions of *mvelele* (culture) and *sialala* (tradition). As we have seen in previous chapters, many peer educators have “been sung for”, either through the Christian or *Musanda Vhusha*, and this entails the accumulation of esoteric knowledge. This information is however not divulged through peer education songs: neither do peer educators perform the *ndayo* described in Chapter 3. Rather, mindful of the need to avoid betraying ritual knowledge, but keen to appropriate the symbolic association with initiation and sexual health, they adopt dance routines from the less secretive stages such as the well known *Domba* “python dance”. Even women who have not gone through initiation participate in these songs for the purposes of AIDS education.

For project designers and peer educators alike, the use of traditional songs is important for the legitimisation of the projects in terms of ascribing “Vendaness”. The fact that *Malende*, *Tshigombela*, and *Tshifase* have historically been employed extensively to construct and articulate social commentary on contemporary affairs (Kruger 1999) does not exclude them from being associated with an idealised, conservative, long-lost past. It is the power associated with this imagined history that peer educators try to capture when using traditional songs and it is precisely because of their historical role in channelling social critique that most educators feel comfortable transforming them into part of the AIDS education repertoire.

Song 9: Malende: Zwonaka – It's beautiful

A) Commonly used lyrics:

Chorus: (opens the song and then becomes the response throughout)

*Zwonaka, zwonaka, zwonakela / it's beautiful, so beautiful, to become beautiful
zwonaka u dzulela na vhathu zwavhudi / it's beautiful to live nicely with others*

Leader⁸³: (a sample of the 'call' throughout)

*U dzula na vhatu, zwo nakelela / Living with others, having parties, it's nice.
Na vhanna wavhudi vha do aluwa ngauralo / and good children will come of it*

B) CPC lyrics

Chorus:

*Zwonaka, zwonaka, zwonakela / it's beautiful, so beautiful to become beautiful
Zwonaka u shumisa condomu zwonakalela / it's nice, so nice to wear a condom.*

Leader:

*U shumisa condom zwi a tshireledza / using a condom will prevent disease.
Na thusula i a tshireledza / and it will prevent Syphilis
Na AIDS i a tshireledza / and it will prevent AIDS.*

Song 10: Malende: Condomiza - haa! (Use condoms)

Chorus:

Condomiza – haa! / condomise (use condoms)

Leader:

*Nda lila iyo weah! Mara ngoho ndi tshi shumisa condomu
/ I am crying oh! but really, I am using condoms
Condomu yanga, mara ngoho nne ndi tho ngo nitshaisa
/ My condom, but really, I will never take you off
Nne ndi shumisa nayo / I work with it
Nne ndi tshimbilonayo / I travel around/walk with it*

⁸³ In songs 9, 10 and 11, I have used a sample selection of the possible lyrics that are all variations on the same theme of biomedical AIDS-related information. The textual content of these songs varies significantly depending on the performer and the region, although the chorus does not seem to be so susceptible to change. This applies for both the 'commonly occurring' and the peer education versions.

Song 10 is adapted from a very popular Malende song called *Sendekela-haa!* It is one of the most widely performed *Malende* in Venda, and like other *Malende* it is rarely performed with the same lyrics twice. The general theme, however, remains consistent (as does the chorus – “*nwana si wanga*” – the child is not mine). It is a song that is intended to mock, in a jovial way, the husband of a wife when he visits his mother-in-law. She claims that the children he has given her daughter are ugly, lazy, stupid, with big heads, small ears and that they are not beautiful enough to be borne of her daughter. It is reflective of the joking relationship that exists between a man and his wives' matrilineal relatives, but is also extended to make general mocking statements about anyone who happens to be present, if the leader is so inclined at the time of performance.

In the context of peer education, the joking relationship in *Sendekela-haa!* can be extrapolated in several ways: it facilitates the airing of latent tensions between sub-groups of educators and between the educators and the audience. For example in the dispute I mentioned in the previous chapter between two religious cliques who suspected each other of poisonous activity at on-going training, accusations were made initially through the performance of this song – as were various attempts at mediation some months later. In a recent single (co-written by myself), local reggae artist Colbert Mukwevho evokes this joking relationship to ask “*huyo nwana ni musedze?, ni musedza zwavhudi, ha fani na inwi, na thoho ya gegenene!*” (Do you see that child? Look carefully at it. It is not the same as you, with your massive head like a calabash full of rotten beer!)

Song 11: Female Initiation song 'Lele'

Initiation lyrics

Chorus:

iyo lele, lele, lele / be patient, be patient, be patient

Leader:

Vhatkana havha mmbondolola mawme / these boys are looking at me

lu vhonna a tina khaladzi / they see I don't have a brother

thi malli khaladzi nnduni mmawwe / my brother won't marry me

(This is referring to a brother, who is expected to stop other boys proposing to his sister, as she is not yet ready to be married, but there will come a time when he must allow her the freedom to have a boyfriend. i.e. too much protection is not always a good thing)

C.P.C lyrics

Chorus : *iyō lele, lele lele....*

Leader: *Doropo iyo thoma nga nne mmawe / the drop (gonorrhoea) started with me*

Ngori a tho ngo u ita na condomu mmawe / because I didn't do it with a condom

Zwino condomu ndi pessini mmawe / now the condom is in my handbag

Lele is sung, according to the peer educators, in the *musivheto* initiation school prior to *Vhusha* (see Chapter 3), urging young girls to ignore the advances of boys. Blacking has, however, recorded a version of it as part of the *ndayo* sessions of the *Vhusha* ceremony (1969a). In the song, the initiates are reminded that their brothers have a duty to protect them against any unwanted attention. But the predicament of the girl is also important; she may marry a young suitor, but she could never marry her over-protective brother. The message to girls here being that there comes a time when you will be in a position to be married and relinquish your brothers' protection but until then you must refrain from intercourse. In the peer educators' version, the social context is transformed and the sexual instruction manipulated to suit the new content. Firstly, the song has moved from a relatively closed, quasi-sacred female initiation ceremony, into a male dominated public arena. Secondly, the lyrical content is transformed from a sympathetic riddle promoting abstinence to a direct confession of STI infection, in which the condom is an unambiguously advantageous addition to the average girl's handbag (*pessini* – lit. in the purse).

Song 12: *Tshifase*: Jojo Tshilangano

Tshifase is a dance in which the sexual and social tensions between young men and young women are brought into the open and, at least theoretically, resolved. For Van Warmelo (1989:397) *Tshifase* is:

[S]ong and dance of young folk...a diversion for moonlit evenings. Boys and girls stand in two groups apart, singing. A girl comes across to the boys, hooks her choice by the arm and leads him to her own group. A lad now does likewise, and so on until the groups are sorted out again.

Although the only lyric in Jojo Tshilangano is a repetition of the song title, the young performers are made aware of a story behind it. Jojo is said to be a migrant labourer (*mugaraba*) who has returned from the reef in characteristic style with money to spend, and is in demand with the local girls. As performed outside of the CPC context, the girls stage a competition to impress Jojo and he subsequently chooses the best dancer. Jojo and his new girlfriend then meet in the middle of the two groups, until another young man is chosen to play Jojo, and so it continues.

The dramatic presentation of Jojo Tshilangano, and others like it, places it stylistically between song and drama in the peer education repertoire. In the version they stage, one of the women dresses in drag as Jojo, donning dungarees, a hat, boots and whatever else she can find. In an elaborate and exaggerated mime, (s)he approaches a girl in the other group and tempts her to dance in a sexually explicit, but comical, routine. With the rest of the peer educators now forming a circle around the pair, she accepts his proposition and they frolic in the middle, until eventually he offers her money for sex. She is tempted, but refuses. Dramatically, Jojo then produces a condom, thrusts it high into the air as the peer educators ululate and the girl falls into his arms – generally to the great amusement of the audience.

Original Songs

The last group of peer educator songs are classed as originals (*khumbulelwa*). Some peer educators have become prolific song writers, and create original material that is performed during weekly public performances in which the composers showcase their talents. As one peer educator wrote in her diary (translated from Tshivenda):

I have been busy writing a new song for the project. Today was a great day for me as we sung it [at the public performance] and everything went well. It's nice to use our own songs, we can really say 'that is my song, I wrote that and now you are all singing it to learn that AIDS kills'. The only problem is when some others get jealous and say they wrote it. But everyone knows it really was me (Diary D: pp33-34).

Some years ago a group of educators at Ha-Rabali embarked on a project to record and sell their own songs commercially, but due to a lack of financial support the project stagnated in the early stages. Nonetheless, many peer educators are talented writers,

and although their melodies may be based on fragments of other popular compositions from the genres outlined above, the songs in this last category are widely accepted as original.⁸⁴ As I suggested above, song writers are encouraged by co-ordinators and CPC staff to keep the lyrical complexity to a minimum (song 15, for example has only one line) focusing rather on harmony, melody and dance, through which a simple message can be framed in complex symbolic terms. The use of the *Domba* python dance, for example, often incorporates non-initiation songs (such as *Condomu ndi bosso*, in the opening vignette) with the intended result of fusing initiation and struggle elements.

Song 13: *Ri do i fhenya* - We will conquer it

<i>Vho mme na Vho khotsi na vhanna ri a fhele</i>	Mother, father and children are perishing
<i>AIDSE ngoho yo ri dzenela</i>	Really, AIDS has entered into us
(x2)	
<i>i a lila, lushaka</i> ⁸⁵ , 'AIDSE i bva ngafhi?'	The nation cries 'where is AIDS from?'
<i>A ri divhi, rothe yone I a vhulaya</i>	We don't know, but it's killing us all
(x2)	
<i>Ndi tshalu ndila dzi ne na nga i thivhela</i>	All we can do on this path is prevent it
<i>Zwone, dzo ni do vha no i fhenya</i>	Like that, we can conquer it
(x2)	
<i>Ri do i fhenya!</i> (x4)	We will conquer it!

Song 14: *Muimana* (Pregnant woman)

<i>Nne ndi muimana,</i>	I am a pregnant woman
<i>Ndo ya hangei sibadela</i>	I went over there to the hospital
<i>Sibadela tsha Silomu</i>	the Siloam hospital
<i>Ndo bvisa malofha</i>	I took out blood (got a blood test)
<i>Neverapine!</i>	Neverapine!

⁸⁴ See Barber (1991) for an analysis of the contested nature of innovation versus tradition in Africa oral arts. Barber's analysis of Yoruba oral poetry (*Oriki*) demonstrates the ways in which *Oriki* simultaneously mark boundaries and transgress them, whilst blending innovative aspects with well established trends of tradition; much like the peer education music outlined in this chapter.

⁸⁵ The word *lushaka* refers to a patrilineal kinship group but can be extended to all one's blood relations. The peer educators use it to refer to "the Venda nation"/all Venda speaking people.

Song 15: Jealous Down!

Jealous Down!, Condomu ya shuma!

Stop being jealous, just use a condom!

Song 15 emerged spontaneously from a drama performed by peer educators at Tshikombani in 2004. It relayed a version of the regional trope in which suspicion and jealousy encompass sexually promiscuous behaviour; a woman asks her husband to use a condom, as she suspects that he was having an extra-marital affair. The husband responds to her request by beating her, claiming that she is jealous of his success and that the real reason for her desire to have safe sex is that *she* had been unfaithful to him and is afraid that *she* would pass on disease. The wife ended the drama rehearsal by exclaiming in English “Jealous down, man!” (meaning “stop being jealous!”) and someone in the group began to place it in a melody, which was then given several layers of harmony, until the woman in the drama began to sing the lead part – and so the song was born. It is performed after this drama during public performances, and the meaning is taken from a logical extension of the drama.

Peer Education Songs: A Summary

For peer educators in Venda, the way in which their message is delivered is very important. Specific songs are chosen to be adapted not just for the ease with which lyrical changes might be implemented in them, but for the pre-existing message in the song, dance, rhythm or entire genre. Perhaps there is an element of pragmatism in that music is one (if not *the*) cheap and easy way to pass on information in rural South Africa, but this necessity has been turned into virtue. Symbolic association with music of the struggle, as we saw in songs 7 and 8, has immediate and obvious implications – placing peer educators at the centre of the contemporary struggle against AIDS whilst invoking the powerful spirit of a mass agitprop social movement to which many of their audience belonged.

The choice of specific struggle songs is not random, and the use of praise and funeral songs that seek to elicit emotional responses in those who hear them is deliberate. Moreover, although church music is also an obvious choice, by replacing “Jesus” with “condom” (song 3), peer educators make a flagrant attempt at shock tactics in a

generally conservative religious environment. Condoms become sacred, worthy of worship and sacrifice with the eventual gift of life over death. The association with tradition (*mvelele*) reveals another important dynamic of the peer education experience. By appropriating specific genres such as *Malende*, *Tshifase* and initiation school music and dance, AIDS education is veiled symbolically in "Vendaness".

For the educators (and project designers) this serves to legitimate the performance and its *raison d'être*. The manner in which peer educators use music to deliver biomedical discourse can thus be seen as an attempt to transform AIDS education into a medley of messages and, by extension, themselves into a motley crew of warriors against social injustice with sacrosanct associations, legitimated by a play on culture. In doing so, they have cobbled together a *bricolage* of historically constituted meanings and present them in one coherent performance in which each musical tradition takes on a new significance in the context of AIDS prevention.

Moreover, the content of the songs is as important as (if not *more* important than) the method of delivery. It demonstrates a sound understanding of basic biomedical knowledge and services offered by the government and AIDS related NGOs like the CPC. For a group of unemployed and under-educated women who live close to the poverty line, this knowledge (and the ways in which it is learned and presented) may indeed be experienced as empowering in that it demonstrates significant differences between them and other unemployed women in the area. With the government contracts for positions as lay councillors in the Vhembe district being implemented by the CPC, it brings them closer to a job "in the government", with all the stability and perks associated with it. As I suggested previously, this is a very real possibility.

The singing of these songs, then, invokes a dual notion of hope; hope that the "nation will not perish" and hope that they may benefit from the situation by progression into employment. It is a public display to their friends and neighbours of their transition from "sitting around doing nothing, waiting on God to help me" (focus group 3/Tshikombani/tape 1/s1/tc40-50) into a more respectable, proud and ultimately employable quasi-social worker. To this extent the songs of peer educators and their weekly performances provide spaces in which they construct and project a distinctly

positive identity through which they strive to negotiate positions of power and authority in adverse circumstances (cf. Erlmann 1996; Coplan 1994).

The songs presented above thus represent more than the salient mechanism by which peer educators in Venda seek to transfer AIDS related knowledge. But to what extent do they actually fulfil this primary, pedagogic task? Although project designers/funders and some academics promote the use of songs as an effective and culturally appropriate process of transferring knowledge, does the evidence from Venda support this?

In his recent analysis of Ugandan performance genres, Barz argues that women's AIDS songs have played a significant role in the country's impressive reduction in HIV transmission rates: both as therapeutic interventions in their own right and as media for AIDS education in remote regions.⁸⁶ Indeed, it is likely that songs have played a role in this; instigating action among some who are exposed to them. They may have encouraged a pregnant woman to be tested for her child's sake if for no other reason, or convinced a commercial sex worker to manage her industrial hazards by using condoms or reducing the number of sexual partners. To be sure, they have sparked conversations about ARV or VCT but the extent to which we can make a causal connection between people's hearing the songs and their following the instructions given must remain limited. Indeed, there is little evidence in the AIDS literature that "accurate" knowledge (whether it be presented in song, text or radio) leads to behaviour change in African populations. As I will demonstrate below, the biomedical line can be re-interpreted and incorporated *into* conservative, patriarchal folk models of illness in a way which serves to further stigmatise the women who promote scientific understandings of AIDS.

In the following section, I return to the opening vignette and broaden the analysis to consider other musical interpretations of HIV/AIDS. This will allow me to develop an argument based on the construction of sexually transmitted illnesses in Venda aetiology through which blood, dirt/pollution, STIs, "deviant" behaviour and medical science are

⁸⁶ HIV prevalence in Uganda decreased from 9.5% of the population in 1997 to 5% in 2001 (UNAIDS 2003 in Barz 2006: 11). Other data from antenatal clinics in Uganda suggest that the figures have fallen from 29.4% in 1992 to 11.25% in 2000 (O'Manique 2004). It is sobering to compare this to comparative statistics for South Africa; from 12.9% in 1997 to 20.1% in 2001 (*ibid.*).

strung together to provide historically constituted explanations for HIV/AIDS under the wider concept of *malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi* (the illnesses/sickness of women).

The Venda “Folk Model” of Sexual Disease

“Folk models” (Good 1994) or “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” (IKS) (Liddell *et al.* 2005) represent “a culture’s collective body of accumulated knowledge and wisdom” (*ibid.*: 624). Within this, “illness representations” in southern African IKS have readily incorporated elements of biomedical explanations since the earliest exposure to them. Notions of pollution, infection, bacteria, dirt etc. have long been common proximate causes of ill health answering the *how?* – beyond which witchcraft and ancestral vengeance generally provide ultimate explanations for the *why?*

In Venda, as in other regions of southern Africa (cf. Heald 1995, 2006; Ingstad 1990; De Bruyn 1992; McDonald and Shatz 2005; Posel 2005; Liddell *et al.* 2005; Niehaus 2007) elements of the biomedical model of AIDS bear remarkable similarity to the representation of sexual illness in indigenous knowledge systems.⁸⁷ Both focus on blood, semen and sexual transmission. This remarkably isomorphic set of representations have been brought to bear upon, or used to explain, social settings in a way which has yielded gendered and generational patterns of blame. Women – and specifically young women – have been held responsible for generating a build-up of pollution through slack moral practices (cf. Bujra 2000a; Baylies 2000) which symptomise a perceived wider neglect of traditional authority. In Venda, we can trace this pattern of blame through songs performed by older men. Again, the focus on songs is not arbitrary. As we shall see, the *Zwilombe* genre to which I now turn has a history of commentary on controversial topics, a theme that I will return to in the next chapter.

⁸⁷ Farmer (1990, 1994, 2006) has documented the ways in which AIDS became incorporated into the pre-existing folk model of illness in Haiti. His work is particularly interesting as he conducted research on the subject there before AIDS was known in the area, and documented the ways in which it was incorporated and the role of narrative and rumour in the reaching of consensus. He looks mainly at AIDS as a “sent illness” in terms of sorcery accusations. Although he does provide an analysis of blood related illness and female morality (1988), he does not connect this directly with aetiology of AIDS as much of the material on southern Africa has.

Zwilombe: “The Prophet Musicians”

The word *Zwilombe* (sing: *Tshilombe*) is the collective noun for a specific group of male musicians in the Venda region. Defined by Blacking (1965: 28) as “wandering minstrel[s]”, they perform with guitars, *dende* (a gourd bow), *tshidzholo* (an elongated zither) and lamellaphones or “thumb pianos” (*mbila*). Linguistically, the term *Zwilombe* is constructed from the same root as the term for *Malombo* rites of affliction (*u lomba* – to fetch something from far away or to borrow from a spirit) and *Tshilombe* musicians are thus associated to a significant extent with the hidden world of the dead that is strategically avoided in peer education songs. Kruger extends this to suggest that *Zwilombe* are spiritually sanctioned and “consequently present themselves as the voice of ancestral spirits or God” (1999/2000: 22). From this position of relative power, *Zwilombe* musicians construct models for and of social reality that constitute:

[A] comprehensive, long-term strategy which attempts to influence the attitude and behaviour of people in the promotion of an ordered, supportive social environment...they are prophet-musicians who act on spiritual command...their instruments become ‘spirit’, symbolic extensions of religious authority (Kruger 1993: 510).

It has been suggested that historically every royal courtyard had a *Tshilombe* whose job consisted of entertaining the king and his royal councillors through song and dance. As Kruger (1993) has shown, *Zwilombe* believe their talents to be hereditary. However, *Zwilombe* is not a conservative social institution engaged in the promotion of patriarchal or hereditary structures of political power. The association with ancestral authority expressed in song by “travelling minstrels” who mostly perform for beer or *folla* (anything that can be smoked) has made *Tshilombe* musicians very marginal figures. This marginality allows them to be openly critical where others would not dare and, possibly in relation to this, they often claim various states of psychological imbalance, or “madness” (Kruger 1993, 1999/2000). As we shall see in the next chapter this allows them to speak openly about death without being implicated in the cause.

During the volatile political climate of the independent homeland era (see Chapter 2), *Tshilombe* musicians exploited their peripheral status to make scathing attacks on the violent and corrupt ministers in the Venda government:

<i>Ngevhala ndi Vho-Ravele</i>	There is Mr. Ravele, struggling to eat
<i>Vho vhulaya na vhone Vho-Mphephu</i>	He killed Mr. Mphephu
<i>Vha tshi nyaga tshidulo a shangoni la Venda</i>	He was after the presidency of Venda
<i>Ri la ri vhanzhi u zwimbela dzi a talula</i>	Many ate, only one became constipated
<i>Havha Vho-Ravela vhone vho dzhia hetshi</i>	This Mr. Ravele took the position
<i>Tshidulo tsha president P.R. Mphephu</i>	of President P.R Mphephu
<i>A si zwavho, vho tou renga</i>	It is not yours, you just bought it.
<i>Ndi kwine vha ndzhie</i>	it is better to kill me by ritual murder.
<i>(Kruger <i>ibid.</i> 20)</i>	

In this way, as spiritually sanctioned social commentators with a desire for an “ordered social environment” and a tendency towards articulating criticism, *Tshilombe* musicians write and sing songs on pressing concerns of the day. They perform at beer halls, parties and other public occasions. At the 2004 annual *Tshikona* festival in Thohoyandou, several *Zwirombe* with a variety of hand-made instruments patrolled the periphery of the dancing arena, in the area where *mahaphe* beer was being sold. An inebriated *Tshilombe* staggered towards me and began to perform a song in Afrikaans (presumably for my benefit) with a musical accompaniment on his bashed guitar. He wanted me to sponsor a song for a jam-jar (scale) of *mahaphe*, and I agreed with the proviso that he sang a song about the activities of *Zwirombe*. His improvised chorus was so impressive that I gladly paid the price:

<i>Nne ndi lilombe!</i>	I am a big, powerful <i>Tshilombe</i> !
<i>A ni ngo vhonaa naa?</i>	Can't you see?
<i>A tho ngo nanga heyi vhutshilo</i>	I did not choose this life
<i>Ndi ndevhe dza midzimu</i>	I am the ears of the ancestors
<i>ndi molomo ya makulu yanu!</i>	I am your dead grandmothers' mouth
<i>Ndi mbambiri na milenzhe</i>	I am a newspaper with feet
<i>ndo shwika shango lothe!</i>	I have been over the entire country!

This impromptu performance revealed not only the spiritual sanction invoked by *Zwirombe*, but also the non-optative acceptance of what they see as their fate. It also demonstrated the ways in which their songs, and social commentaries, are often improvised for the benefit of their audience. Indeed, *Tshilombe* lyrics are rarely standardised, but are based on recurring themes and phrases that constitute a core to each song. This is partly due to the pragmatics of remembering lyrics as most songs last at least ten minutes. Moreover, the vast majority of performances are made after

significant quantities of beer have been consumed, sometimes adding to the flow of consciousness of lyrical composition and at other times seriously hindering it. Melodies, on the other hand, are more likely to remain consistent in repeat performances. Such dynamics, Barber (1991) reminds us, lie at the very heart of oral performance throughout the African continent.

The song below, *Zwidzumbe* (Secrets) was performed for me the first time in 2000 by the famous and prolific *Tshilombe* Solomon Mathase. At that time, he called it *Ri tshimbilanayo* (we walk with it; Appendix B line 36) and complained through the song that promiscuous women were "carrying AIDS around with them", infecting men and "the sons of the nation". Through the verses, he called for them to adhere to the laws of "God's country", in which they walk without giving due thanks or deference, causing the nation to perish (*lushaka lu khou fhela*: Appendix B line 23) in the process. This general theme is remarkably similar to a song by *Tshilombe* Mmbangiseni Madzivhandila, recorded by Kruger (1993: 348-356) in which promiscuous girls, with an insatiable sexual appetite, are blamed for harbouring and spreading the HI virus.

When I met up with Solomon in 2004, I asked him to perform *Ri tshimbilanayo* again so that I could make a digital recording for my thesis. He informed me that he had been thinking about the song a lot, and it was now called *Zwidzumbe* (secrets). We met many times over several months, and again I became a regular visitor to his homestead, which was often a hive of musical activity during the weekends. Solomon, like his peers, claims to be an adherent of ancestral religion rather than Christianity. He makes regular sacrificial offerings to his ancestors. He also engages in small scale acts performed by traditional healers. We made many trips deep into the bush to Ha Makuya (see Map 3) in my pick-up truck so that he could collect various parts of trees and shrubs for use in relation to his families, friends' and my general and spiritual well-being. Instructions for which plants to choose came in the form of encounters with ancestral spirits in dreams. Nonetheless, Solomon often uses the life of Jesus in metaphor, and clearly has great respect for a Christian God: "It is not my place to tell

others who their God is" he once told me, "How do I know that when I speak with my ancestors, God can not also hear us?" (Solomon notes. Book 4/p33)⁸⁸

He performed many songs during each musical session that I participated in (see Chapter 1) but always made a point of playing his *nyimbo ngaha AIDSE* (song about AIDS), announcing each time to his audience that they must remain quiet in order that "Mr. Fraser" should hear his account (*tshitori zwavhukuma* – *lit.* the *real* story) of the epidemic. He played it slightly differently each time, adding changes in the lyrical composition or the structure of the guitar accompaniment. The central themes, however, remained consistent with the version I recorded in 2000.

In the version below, he shifts between the voices and opinions of many different actors, simulating gossip and social situations in which AIDS is discussed. Through this process, he poses questions and provides answers to construct a complex representation of the ways in which HIV/AIDS is understood by the majority of poor, rural Venda men and older (initiated) women. His performance is a powerful articulation of the extent to which AIDS has been incorporated into the conservative and patriarchal folk model of sexual illness.

The extract below is taken from a recording at Solomon's homestead in Ngulumbi village in June, 2005 (see pictures 5.1, 5.2) and the entire track appears as the last song on the accompanying CD. A full translation of this is presented in Appendix B and the extract below begins at 8 minutes 50 seconds on the CD track. Note the stylistic change in Solomon's voice, from authoritative statements, to snappy, almost whispered rumour as he begins to imitate people discussing the cause of a death. This is significant for the argument to be made in the next chapter.

⁸⁸ This is not to suggest that the concepts of God in ancestral and Christian theology are counterposed against each other, although there may be grounds for claiming this. Although adherents to each have been strongly distinguished as social and class groupings and by their divergent practices and political affiliations, the concept of God in ancestral religion is not incompatible with that of Christianity.

Zwidzumbe (Secrets)

(65) *Houla muduhulu, nda ndi sa mufuni zwone, na u la nwanawanga, nda ndi sa mufuni zwone vhone* That grandchild, I really loved him, and that other child of mine, I really loved him too,

(66) *mara u pf i o vhulwa nga yenei Aidse* but they say he was killed by this AIDS

(67) *vhone, vhopfa uri zwone ndi zwifhi?* You, what did you hear?

(68) *U la munwe ari hupfi hai!*
O tou wela No! He slept with (ate) another woman who was unclean after an abortion

(69) *Munwe ari hai!*
Thiri o vha a khou pfana
na u la musadzi wa vho-mukene? Another said No!
isn't it that he slept with
The wife of Mr so and so?

(70) *Nwana wa vho-mugede vhone vha Muthemba...* you know, the child of Mr Muthemba...

(71) *ula?*
ari thiri u tou nga o vha o bvisa thumbu? That one? Do you really trust her?
Didn't she have an abortion?

(72) *Munwe ari hai!*
Thiri o vha a na zwilondo nga nnyoni? Another said no!
Doesn't she have sores on her vagina?

(73) *Munwe ari hai!*
O vha o tou vhifha muvhilini Another said no!
she was pregnant (lit. ugly in the body)

[Now speaking as a practicing *inyanga*]

(74) *Ngoho mara zwone*
zwa vhukuma ndi zwifhipo? Really, but honestly,
Which one of these is the truth here?

(75) *Tshihulwane, o vhuya a dida*
na kha nne ari ndi mufhe mushonga they visited me, the great one,
so that I could give them medicine

(76) *A tshiyi pfana na nwana wa Vho Mukedene* when he fell in love with that child
of Mr. Mukedene.

(77) *thumbu a yongo fara* but she could not conceive a child

(78) *Mulandu ndi zwilonda*
zwe zwi la zwa nwe ndi li a 'gokhonya' the problem was these vaginal sores
they led to her getting 'gokhonya'

(79) *A vho ngo vhonna na ula*
nwana wawe wa u thoma, o mbo di lovha Didn't you see that one,
her first child died

(80) *O vha o funa o ya hangeni*
ha 'vho Nyatshavhungwa'.
Thiri na vhala vha a zwikonda? she should have consulted
Mrs. Nyatshavhungwa⁸⁹
Isn't it that she can deal with these
difficult things?

⁸⁹ This refers to a specific group of traditional healers called *maine*. They are comparable to family doctors and specify in treating specific ailments. See below.

In this extract, Solomon raises closely related key issues from which we can sketch the parameters of a Venda AIDS aetiology. They are abortion/contraception (*o tou wela* or *u bvisa tumbu*), notions of socially unacceptable promiscuity and the role of the *inyanga* in treating conditions such as vaginal sores (*zwilonda*, leading to *gokhonya*). These are connected, and I will deal with each in turn.

Firstly, towards the end of the song, Solomon makes an explicit connection between AIDS and the woman who "could not conceive a child"; a reference to the use of the contraceptive injection/pill. In his own words (translated from Tshivenda):

When a woman is sleeping with a man, the bloods are not the same. This has not really been a problem unless you were sleeping with a prostitute who had too many mixtures in her blood and could always give you illness. The problem now is that women are using the pills and injections from the doctors...they get them at the clinics...I have seen them trying to hide it. When women use the pills to prevent a pregnancy, she will get pimples and wounds and smelly discharge from her vagina. You know women every month they have their period, now after taking the pill the periods disappear, so where does the dirty blood go?! It gets into their veins, they can not conceive and they get this AIDS or whatever. Then the man gets inside her without knowing and catches it (Solomon Mathase Tape 1/S2-50-end).

This idea of "mixed" or dirty blood which ought to have been taken out of the female body through the menstrual cycle is widespread. It is linked to notions of pollution, sexual taboos, social and physical illness throughout southern Africa. For Karanga speakers in the Ndanga and Bikita districts of Zimbabwe, it is known as *svina* (lit. dirt) and avoidance of it is fundamental to the maintenance of fertility and sexual health. It is thought to be in particular abundance before the first period after a woman gives birth, and thus sex is highly taboo during this time (Aschwanden 1987: 21-23; Ingstad 1990: 33 among Tswana). In Malawi, some traditional practitioners have also conceptualised the symptoms of AIDS as a direct result of female transgression of blood related sexual taboos (Lwanda 2003). Similar observations have also been made in Botswana (Ingstand 1990; De Bruyn 1992; Heald 2006). In other regions of South Africa women's bodies are also conceptualised as highly suitable places for harbouring "dirt". As Leclerc-Madlala (2002) has shown in KwaZulu Natal, menstrual blood is intrinsically connected to notions of pollution and sexual health. She suggests that this wider complex of meaning has been mobilised to provide non-biomedical explanations for the AIDS epidemic and that "women's promiscuity" (*ibid*: 91) is widely regarded as being

primarily responsible for the unhealthy contamination of blood (cf. Ashforth 2005: 160). In this context, widespread belief that sex with a virgin can cure or prevent HIV infection must be understood in terms of pre-menstrual purity as the flipside to the dangerous mixing of, or interference with, bodily cycles thought to be of the natural order.

Demonstrating the historical connections made between diseases of the blood, pollution and the female body in Venda, Stayt comments of conception that:

[A] child receives its flesh and blood from the mother, and sensory organs and bones from the father...probably because of the respective colours of the menstrual flow and the semen...all illnesses connected with the blood thus come from the mother's side of the family (Stayt 1931: 260-1).

For Solomon, then, as with many others in southern Africa, the natural cycles that remove pollution from the female body are central to healthy individual and thus social reproduction. The introduction of methods of contraception such as the pill and the injection put this system in danger by regulating the flow in ways perceived as unnatural that result in the trapping of "dirt". Women who use – or are *suspected* of using – contraception thus harbour dams of dangerous pollution that will eventually make them, and men who come into their intimate contact, ill.

This sickness can take a variety of forms, such as *zwilondo* (line 72; open genital sores that resemble the third phase of syphilis), *gokhonya* (line 78; also known as *lukuse*, through which a woman's children die in infancy⁹⁰), *tshidzwonyonyo* (a red, burning rash on the genitals similar to thrush), or *tshimbambamba* (through which a woman develops yellow pimples in the genital area that burst during sex and cause a white, smelly discharge similar to gonorrhoea). This complex of sexually transmitted infections is known in TshiVenda as *malwadze dza vhfumakhadzi*: the illnesses of women. As a blood-borne infection transmitted through sexual intercourse, AIDS has been incorporated easily into the frame. In the same way, at some point in history, syphilis was incorporated as *thusula* and gonorrhoea as *doropo* (see songs 3 and 11). The ways in which these sexually transmitted infections are explained through the

⁹⁰ *Gokhonya* is usually found in women after a difficult or problematic birth such as that induced by caesarean section. Symptoms include the child refusing the mother's milk and red marks on the child's head and neck. White pimples will be found inside the mother's vagina, and the conventional cure involves the *inyanga* scraping the vaginal sores with a razor and mixing the resultant fluid with the mother's urine and a mixture of three herbs. This is then given to the child in a milky drink and it will be healed. The mother, however, must undergo several more rites of purification.

biomedical lexicon render them quite compatible with the Indigenous Knowledge System (cf. Liddle *et al.* 2005).

Secondly, the evidence above demonstrates the ways in which menstrual blood and abortion can be constitutive of pollution that leads to the onset of HIV/AIDS. This has also been documented in other parts of the region. Auslander, for example, states that certain Ngoni women who have become economically independent in Zambia "are said to become pregnant and self-abort continually, thus altering their 'wombs' in such a manner as to infect with AIDS those who cohabit with them (1993: 182)". The connection here between specific women and a desire for economic independence, together with the use of fertility blocking biomedicine that seems to be beyond male control, is an important one in the context of peer educators' apparent upward social mobility. But it would be misleading to suggest that we can understand the current situation solely through recourse to class mobility.

In line 68, when Solomon sings about the woman who "*o tou wela*" (lit. to fall deep inside of something), he is referring to an abortion that has not been conducted in the "correct" manner. For Solomon and his peers, the act of abortion in itself, whilst not encouraged, is not taboo. The process of *u bvisa tumbu* (abortion – lit. to take out the stomach; line 72) must, however, be practised in strict accordance with principles of good practice in which the womb must be cleansed with specific herbal remedies to render it (and the woman) clean, and thus fertile again. In Solomon's own words (translated from Tshivenda):

A girl can get pregnant and she goes to the doctors for an abortion, you know, maybe the father of the child is an important person, or her father may be a pastor [in the church] or whatever, you know, these things do happen here in Venda. She goes to the doctor, they give her the pills and the baby dies. In our culture we have medicine that can also do that and then cleanse the womb out because when she does this it is contaminated with many diseases that should be treated. But they do not get the treatment from the *inyanga*. They are afraid maybe he will talk [about the abortion to others], so they just let the diseases build up until a man gets inside and catches that AIDS or whatever. These things are not even a secret. Venda boys are told all of this at *Murundu*. (Solomon Mathase in Tshivhase translations: end/second half/Tape 1)

A traditional healer (*inyanga*) made this connection more explicit during an interview (in English):

[I]t [AIDS] is the poison from the aborted child. You see, there are many types of medicine that can cure these things, they circulate around the body, and the waste is taken out in urine or faeces. None of these tablets affect the bones; they stay in the flesh and veins only. Now, in abortion, after one month or so, that tablet, the medicine that destroys the entire foetus, with bones and cartilage combined, it becomes a liquid. What remains is the bone solution, which remains inside the body of the woman as poison. The bones can not be destroyed, they remain within. Only the blood comes out if she menstruates. Then we must put the medicine inside her and leave it for some few days until she is clean again. If she does not come to us for treatment, then the next male comes in with his penis, and catches it [AIDS]...Yes, it's osmosis, when the penis gets erect, it gets warm, the pores open up, all the poisonous gasses in her womb will give him AIDS. The carrier, the first carrier [of AIDS] was the woman who aborted a child and did not get cleaned (Interview E.Maphanda 7.08.2000).

The same *inyanga* articulated his points in a poem. He sent copies by airmail to Tony Blair, the Queen and Bill Gates in the hope that they would provide funding to develop his herbal infusion that acts as the post-abortion purifying agent mentioned above, and also thus as a cure for AIDS. The last three verses of the poem, written in fluent English, read:

V.5

AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, revenge of the unborn,
The white man is unaware you are the remains of the foetus,
Yes, AIDS is the poison from the aborted child,
Our ancestors have identified the *muti*, the signs and the symptoms.

V.6

Black nurses and doctors have become sell-outs,
The custom they buried for a foreign culture,
When ours originated with the creator,
Who is in all science and all life.

V.7

He did hide the healing power in herbs,
And Christianity failed to align faith and creation,
The vagina is related to Rwanda and Kosovo.
The pussy being known for pleasure, instead of progeny.

A copy of the entire poem is attached in an Appendix C. It is interesting in the context of Stayt's quotation that, upon the disruption of this natural process, it is the male essence (the white bones) of the foetus that Maphanda suggests are resistant to the medicine, and fester into the gases which are said to cause AIDS. This suggests that sexual illness can not be traced to blood alone, but that disruption of natural cycles also renders maleness

as potentially polluted. Indeed, as we have already seen, although the folk model renders women guilty as carriers of pollution, a dichotomous distinction between the genders is inadequate here. It is young, often promiscuous women who are held to blame by men and older women alike, whilst those who follow conservative, patriarchal norms are not (more of which below). In this way, the important divisions here are as much generational as they are gendered, and this becomes clear when we consider the dynamics of knowledge and experience that are in play at this juncture.

The “Folk Model”, Knowledge and Experience

Like scientific explanations, any folk model is an historically and culturally constituted code of understanding (Good 1994). The ways in which AIDS has been incorporated into Venda aetiology, as we have seen, draws consistently from relatively recent, “outside” influences on the model. The contraceptive pill and the injection are available only from clinics that practice “western” biomedicine. The pills that can terminate a pregnancy are also located behind confidential doors to be dispensed by doctors in clinics or hospitals. Whilst we have seen that the folk model has absorbed much of the biomedical material, this has not occurred in an arbitrary manner. It has done so in a way that renders science guilty of encouraging the build-up of pollution. This is because, fundamentally, the peer educators have introduced a competing corpus of knowledge that, like the folk model, claims to hold the key to healthy sexual and social reproduction.

Is it coincidence then that AIDS is associated through the folk model with the people and places who have openly named it? I will deal with this specific aspect in the following chapter, but for now we should note that the doctors, nurses, and outside experts with their methods and medicines that disrupt the pathways through which female bodily pollution is managed, are inseparable from folk understandings of AIDS. The contraceptive pill, the injection and biomedical processes of abortion are inextricably implicated in the controversy. They are bed-fellows of biomedicine in causing the unhealthy accumulation of pollution in female bodies that aspire to transcend patriarchal constraints on their fertility and possibly even their socioeconomic position. It is not, then, that these relatively recently arrived technologies of biomedicine

have been rejected by those adhering to a folk model of sexual illness. Rather, they have become central to an explanatory paradigm that gives historical and cultural meaning to AIDS: a meaning concerned with gendered and generational orders of social control.

The evidence currently in question raises a third and final issue that will bring us to a conclusion: the role of *certain* women in facilitating the spread of AIDS and other sexual diseases. In *Zwidzumbe*, Solomon sings of the young girl who can't be trusted (line 70-72), and the actors in his dialogue are unclear if she has aborted a child, has *zwilondo* (genital sores), if she was ever pregnant or the identity of her current lover. As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, Venda girls' initiation is explicitly concerned with the maintenance of such a conservative female sexuality; based on systems of gendered and generational authority. We can now see that this system of authority exists within a wider patriarchal environment and thus legitimises – and is legitimised by – ideal values such as virginity until marriage, appropriate sexual relations and fertility. These are defined in contrast to "deviant" forms of behaviour such as extra-marital affairs and promiscuity, which are thought to cause illness and thus disrupt harmonious social interaction.

The connections between ritual knowledge of the *Vhusha* and the widespread articulation of the Venda aetiology of sexual health is thus comparable to Lambek's notion of "experts" and "the man on the road" who, as we saw in the introduction, has a "working knowledge" of many fields (or "branches" in Barth's terms) of knowledge through which s/he can react to typical situations to achieve typical results in such a way as Solomon interprets the AIDS epidemic. In this case, the "marginal change" to the corpus (Barth 2002) is occurring not within the ritual context but through strategic appropriation of medical science by those who maintain a working knowledge of the system.

It is within the realms of this working knowledge that men and older (initiated) women find evidence to associate certain young women in their midst for the current "crisis in social reproduction" (Comaroff and Comaroff: 2004). As Hunter (2002) and Wojcicki (2002) have shown, however, sexual networks in South Africa cannot easily be explained in terms of Eurocentric notions of promiscuity or prostitution. Multiple

concurrent long term relationships that involve complex transactional negotiations and a certain degree of commitment between men and women (often younger girls) are commonplace and not necessarily viewed as socially unacceptable. In Venda, this is manifest in the social institution of *farakano*, through which a married man may have a secret lover (*mufarakano* plural *mafarakano*). The meaning of this term seems to have changed in the recent past. Van Warmelo (1989: 207) states from data gathered in the 1930s that it derives from the verb *u gwanda* (to be entwined like wild, thorny weeds) and that it refers to the "mutual aid set up of man and woman 'just living together'" (*ibid.*). During my fieldwork, however, it was used to distinguish a secret wife (*mufarakano*) from an official wife (*musadzi* or, respectfully, *mufumakadzi*) and girlfriend (*cherry*). So long as a man provides material goods to the woman's homestead, and the woman is not married, it is quite acceptable for a child to be born of the relationship. A wealthy man may have several *mafarakano* and may even propose marriage to one, if the circumstances are favourable. However, such relationships are generally kept secret and only discussed with groups of close friends.

A *mufarakono* is very different to a beer hall prostitute who offers quick-fix "survival sex" (Wojcicki *ibid.*) for on-the-spot cash. Such women are relatively common throughout Venda, especially in the vicinity of the larger towns of Thohoyandou, Makhado and Musina. They are regularly demonised in the media for lurking outside beer halls and hotels, soliciting business from passing men and encouraging them to visit motels for illicit sex. This media-driven demonisation has generally focussed on the fact that many commercial sex-workers are under-age illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe. Numerous articles in tabloids such as the *Daily Sun* warn men against the dangers of such girls who they suggest not only spread disease, but may even steal from you and then accuse you of rape. Nonetheless, in rural shebeens and beer halls (especially at month end when men are known to have disposable income) many Venda girls/women engage in such sexual transactions.

The girl that Solomon sings about in *Zwidzumbe* is one of these (cf. Appendix B: lines 13-18, 38-41). Unlike a *mufarakono*, who may bear children with her lover, this girl, and those of her ilk, are the type who use the contraceptive pill or injection to prevent pregnancy. It is also implied that she – and others like her – are more likely to have had an abortion and failed to have their womb cleaned (*o tou wela*). For Solomon and his

peers, she represents the type of "deviant" woman who is responsible for spreading the illnesses of women (*malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi*). While not necessarily a full-time commercial sex worker, she may be occasionally involved in such transactions.

Alternatively, and importantly, she might have been *rumoured* to be using the pill or have had an abortion. To re-quote Solomon from above:

This [dirty blood] has not really been a problem unless you were sleeping with a prostitute who had too many mixtures in her blood and could always give you illness. The problem now is that women are using the pills and injections from the doctors...they get them at the clinics...I have seen them trying to hide it.

In addition to full- or part-time sex workers who have "always" been bearers of illness, then, there is the more recent category of women using biomedical techniques to regulate their fertility. With their prolific knowledge of biomedical concepts, declared publicly on a weekly basis through songs, peer educators fall directly into this recently-constructed category. They are guilty through association; caught in the web that connects knowledge with experience.

If connections are drawn between extensive familiarity with the biomedical model and its practical use, we must see these in the wider context of the more general links between knowledge and experience. As I outlined in the Introduction with the work of Barth and Lambek, anthropological approaches to ritual knowledge have highlighted the fundamental nature of experiential process through which claims to authoritative knowledge are facilitated. This was incorporated into Chapter 3, in which I showed that the powerful relationship between knowledge and experience is integral to the hierarchy of authority in *Vhusha* initiation. I also suggested that it is pervasive throughout social relations pertaining to ritual contexts more generally and can be seen to operate in discourses of the occult, rituals of affliction, prophet-led Christianity and traditional healing. In this way, it transgresses religious and political boundaries in the maintenance and transference of potentially dangerous, but essential, ritual knowledge.

Whereas we have seen that experience is intrinsically connected to the generation of legitimate and authoritative ritual knowledge, we must now *reverse* this to explain, at least partly, Solomon's assumption that the peer educators' biomedical repertoire is

based on experience of such medicine. For Solomon and his peers, and for initiated women, it is inconceivable that the peer educators' claims to biomedical knowledge, like the ritual experts claims to ritual knowledge, would *not* be rooted in experiential processes of it. These issues – and the ways in which connections between knowledge and experience can be transcended – behove deeper analysis, and I return to them in the next chapter.

Given the modest but growing literature on the connections between AIDS and folk models of sexual health in southern Africa, it is perhaps surprising that authors have been hesitant to report on the means by which non-biomedical illness representations are transferred and maintained within the population. This is surely crucial if we are to understand the dynamics of the so-called Indigenous Knowledge Systems beyond a cursory acknowledgment that they are present and to some extent compatible with scientific models.

During my fieldwork, as we see in the next chapter, it was very rare for anyone to *openly* discuss illness, death or its causes in either scientific or non-scientific terminology. To be sure, gossip and backstage rumour played an important part in the circulation of non-biomedical illness representations, as did the songs of peripheral artists like Solomon Mathase and other *Zwilombe*. But these concepts, as part of a wider body of knowledge, are also formalised, and to some extent regulated, through the institutions of traditional healing and initiation. Whilst the role of traditional healers in the promotion of non-biomedical representations of AIDS in the region has received limited attention (see for example Ingstad 1990: Ashforth 2000, 2005), the role of initiation has yet to be explored in this vein.

The relationship between these two institutions is a complex, but fascinating one that I have little space to explore at this juncture. As I have mentioned, it is perhaps useful to conceptualise this in terms of the relationship between those who have "expert" knowledge and the functional capacities of the "man on the street". As we have seen in Chapter 3, the *Vhusha ya Vhatendi* (the Christian *Vhusha*) and the *Vhusha ya Musanda* (chief's *Vhusha*) are both based on the moral code (*milayo*) that is symbolised through the tricolour symbolism of red (which is unintentionally reflected in the uniforms of peer educators), white and black. This ritual knowledge enshrines the centrality of blood

related taboos, sexual (social) health and fertility. It is also concerned with the centrality of traditional medicine in treating sexual illness. Thus, an important and currently overlooked means by which this 'folk model' is transmitted to young people, and more importantly reinforced in older generations, is through the initiation schools discussed in Chapter 3.

The recent surge in official attempts to increase female initiation has, as I have argued, reinforced the hierarchical authority within the *Tshivhambo* ritual hut. This has, by extension and possibly inadvertently, bolstered the authority of the ritual knowledge upon which that hierarchy is based and thus the authority of the "working knowledge" of the ritual corpus that is accessible for general consumption. When men like Solomon sing about dirty blood, *zwilonda* and "breaking the rules" (see lines 102-105 Appendix C), they are articulating the values and moral code not only of traditional healing and initiation, but of the patriarchal and conservative order of which they are a part. This is based, fundamentally, on respect for ancestors and thus on generational and patriarchal authority.

The extent to which AIDS in Venda is understood by men and older women through the folk model should thus be seen in this wider, contemporary political context. Through this lens, we can not ignore the policy decisions of traditional leaders to increase the frequency of initiation. We must also recognise that this is based on notions of an African renaissance that have become central to strategies for the consolidation of power in response to the nationally instigated competition for paramount chieftaincy. In this way the African renaissance has indeed promoted "African solutions to African problems", and *Khosi Tshivhase*'s reaction to recent ANC policy has served to legitimate the corpus of ritual knowledge over which, paradoxically, he has little influence.

In this way, alternative understandings of AIDS must not be thought of as mystical, lingering hangovers from a pre-scientific yesteryear but – at least in part – as the dynamic manifestations of the contemporary political economy in post-apartheid South Africa. As an edited volume demonstrated conclusively with regard to witchcraft in Africa over ten years ago, so folk models of illness representation are:

[N]ot archaic or exotic phenomena, somehow isolated or disjointed [from] historical processes of global political and economic transformation. Rather, these are moral discourses alive to the basic coordinates of experience, highly sensitive to contradictions in economy and society (Auslander 1993: 168).

Conclusion

This chapter has raised several interlinked issues through which I have attempted to explore that which lies beneath the tip of Fabian's metaphoric iceberg. In reiterating their connections, I would like to return to Blacking's theoretical dilemma between music's dual role as a conservative force for equilibrium and a radical force for change.

The evidence presented above provides us with ample evidence for both of these possibilities. Firstly, I argued that the songs of the peer educators have followed government policy in a reactionary manner that has not incorporated advocacy but deferred to the *status quo*. This is closely connected to the comfortable relationship between office staff and Provincial Department of Health, and peer educators have to a large extent acted as peripatetic advertisements for government services. On the other hand, however, it could equally be argued that in the cobbling of their musical *bricolage*, peer educators are engaging in a form of resistance against the patriarchal model that frames them as carriers of pollution. The use of songs from the struggle in this endeavour can be seen as an explicit statement of defiance and an attempt to embody the spirit of resistance. The very act of demonstrating knowledge of government services and the biomedical model is, for the peer educators, a demonstration of their ability and willingness to transcend their current peer group, to get a job in the government and to realise their vision of an alternative reality. However as I will argue in the next chapter this acts to stigmatise their actions even more.

Secondly, I compared peer education songs with *Zwilombe* music, and again we see the dual capacity of music in Solomon's rendition of *Zwidzumbe*. His song clearly articulates concern about how modern medical practices have caused the build-up of pollution in many young women. He makes the powerful, but implicit connection between knowledge and experience, to suggest that those who "hide" birth control at clinics are negating traditional structures of authority and thus placing their fertility and sexual health in jeopardy. Solomon's song is an articulation of attempted resistance

against this, but it also demonstrates the extent to which folk models can incorporate biomedicine, at least within proximate causes of illness (cf. Liddell *et al.* 2005). As such *Zwidzumbe* symbolises one of the most conservative forces in Venda; that of the ancestors and traditional authority. By reinforcing the role of pollution, cleansing and the observance of taboos, Solomon is echoing the ritual knowledge of the *Vhusha* and *Domba*, which has recently been bolstered by the rise in *Vhuhosi* and which is representative of the conservative, patriarchal order upon which traditional and generational authority is based and of which initiation and healing is a part.

Crucially, these observations are the result of a comparative endeavour that seeks critically to assess the songs of peer education within the wider context of a performative culture in which music has the capacity to support and resist the *status quo*. An analysis of peer educators' songs, seen out of context, might easily lead to the conclusion that they are indeed actively involved in the negotiation of positive identities, drawing on notions of God, the struggle, tradition and biomedicine, through which they aspire to government employment. On this basis we could also deduce, as Barz has done with AIDS songs in Uganda, the efficacy of peer education performance.

But through a comparison with *Tshilombe* music, which is closely connected to the *Malombo/Ngoma* complex avoided by the peer educators because of its non-optative nature, a more comprehensive picture begins to develop. This picture is necessarily a messy one, pointing to similarities and differences that exist between alternative, but not necessarily "rival", interpretations of AIDS in Venda. And yet the biomedical framework within which AIDS has been introduced to Venda dovetails very neatly with the folk model, and the fact that young women are the local bearers of this scientific model confirms the belief of many men and older (initiated) women that this is indeed *malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi* (the illnesses of women), and, as the old man said in the opening vignette, "not our concern".

This throws light on the new-found positive identity of peer educators in that through constructing their new selves they make it possible for others to simultaneously reconstruct them on several levels – not only as I show in the next chapter by taking public responsibility for AIDS, but with close connections to the biomedical circles from which the pill, injection and condom originate. Any attempt at an AIDS inspired "medical

ethnomusicology" would thus do well to examine AIDS songs in their contextual, complex, relationship with what other groups sing about it. Failure to do so may lead to the damaging propagation of half-truths and misconceptions upon which so many mis-targeted AIDS interventions have been modelled.

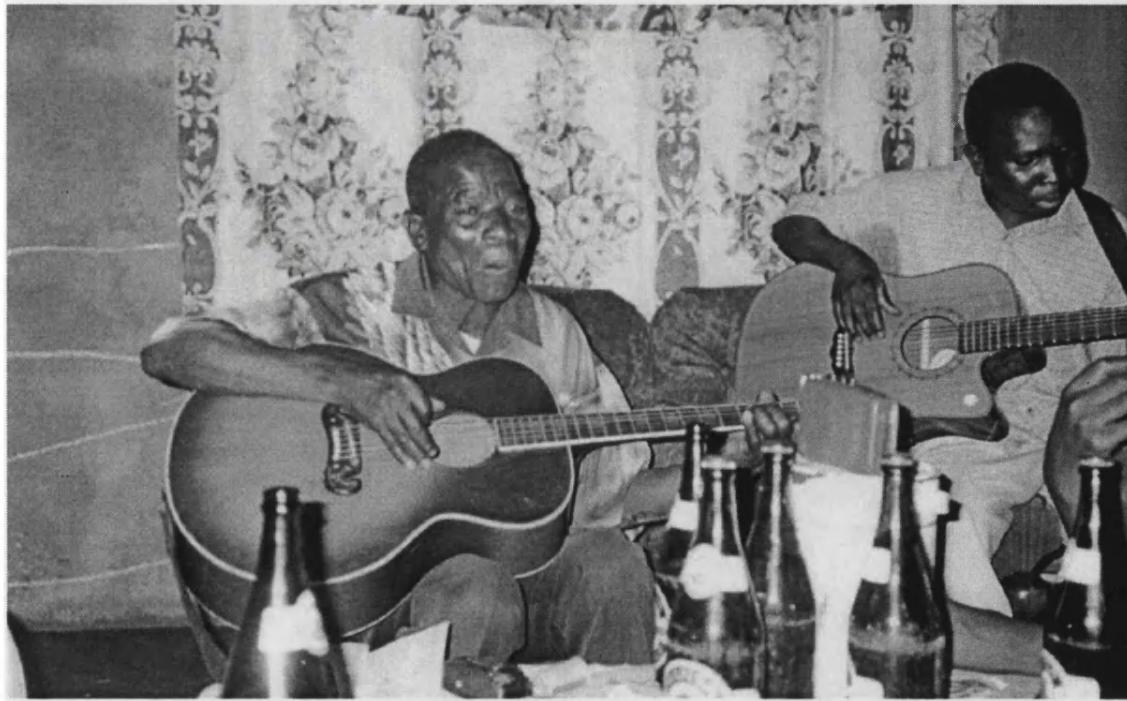
However – and finally – if we accept that the folk model influences sexual decisions made by men (cf. Liddell *et al.* 2005), then the condom may remain a feasible option to prevent contact with 'dirty' blood or gasses that are believed to lead to AIDS. The ways in which men perceive their own risk of becoming infected with HIV must then be understood in terms of *who* the sexual partner is, and not *how* intercourse takes place. This illuminates a reported pattern of behaviour in which some men have unprotected sex with their wife or long term partner with whom they have established a relationship of trust, but use condoms if they are having a brief affair with a stranger, short term girlfriend or a casual encounter with a sex worker (cf. Stadler 2003). In terms of the patterns of blame enunciated above, it is the polluted character of the sex worker which explains why a condom is used in her case. Such patterns of condom use could equally, of course, be attributed to men who subscribe to the biomedical model, who accept that sex workers are more likely to be infected with HIV, and who are reluctant to "take it home" with them. These need not be mutually exclusive possibilities, and given that the biomedical and folk models are not incommensurable, patterns of condom use may ultimately be explained through a combination of the two.

However, as I now go on to show in the next chapter, this argument fails to grasp the complexity of the situation in rural South Africa. The condom, as the central symbol of prevention, has often been blamed for *causing* AIDS.

Chapter 5 Pictures



Picture 5.1: Recording *Zwidzumbe* at Solomon Mathase's home.



Picture 5.2: Solomon Mathase and his backing guitarist, Vho Joe.

CHAPTER 6

“Condoms Cause AIDS”: Poison, Denial and Degrees of Separation

These things, you must understand, there are some things we just do not talk about here in Venda. That is why there is so much gossip (Interview with Chief of Fondwe – 28/12/04).

In this final ethnographic chapter, I make a critique of the prevalent notion that people in South Africa do not speak about AIDS because they are “in denial” of it. To do this, I widen the lens of analysis to consider HIV not just as a sexually transmitted infection, but as a source of perceived unnatural death. I will argue that the complex social processes that create and maintain the avoidance of open conversation around HIV and AIDS must be understood in the wider context of conventions through which causes of death are, and are not, spoken about in the region. I will demonstrate that by invoking silence, coded language and obfuscation, “degrees of separation” are constructed that create a social distance between an individual and the unnatural cause of another’s death. I will also attempt to explain, within this argument, why certain people can and do speak openly about causes of death without fear of implication.

The construction of AIDS as a “public secret” (cf. Mookherjee 2006) must thus be seen in the context of strategies that are intended to negotiate limited responsibility as opposed to a blanket denial of reality. Indeed, the public silence around AIDS demonstrates the very real acceptance of the problem and the seriousness with which it has been met. Nonetheless, the conviction that southern Africa is gripped by a macro-level AIDS denial has influenced policy makers profoundly and has been equated with the need for more education and empowerment programmes in order to “break the silence”. In this chapter, I will suggest that unless our understanding of the avoidance of open conversation is grounded in a more sensitive understanding of the relationship between language and folk aetiologies, then the breaching of it in the form of female peer-group education can produce potentially counter-productive consequences.

This argument has far reaching consequences for the social position of peer educators, particularly for the effectiveness of their strategy in promoting condom use. Building on previous arguments, I will now show that proponents of the folk model, in conjunction with powerful, parallel social forces, attribute blame to them on the basis of their breaching "public silence" and construct them as carriers of the illness. This plays directly into the knowledge/experience paradigm, and acts to confirm what many people suspect: that peer educators are vectors of the virus. The combined effect of these processes has profound ramifications for the central symbol of prevention, and condoms have thus also been implicated in the spread of the virus. In order to make this argument, however, I must refocus my ethnographic gaze to present an analysis not of AIDS, but of another, parallel, phenomenon that also has unnatural death at its core.

In this way, I turn to a spate of alleged poisonings that took place during my fieldwork. I will then connect the ways in which people responded to this with the widespread reluctance to discuss AIDS openly. In order to assess the implications of this for current approaches to the topic, I open with a brief review of literature on the subject.

Secrecy and Denial in the Southern African AIDS Literature

In the current literature on HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, it has become fashionable – almost conventional – to understand the avoidance of open conversation that surrounds the pandemic in terms of shame, stigma, and mostly commonly, denial. Prominent authors such as Barnett and Whiteside have argued that, with regard to AIDS, "it is difficult to see what is happening, harder to measure, easiest to deny" (2002: 5). This echoes the sentiments of many other commentators on the topic, for example Herdt (1987), Campbell and Mzaidume (2001), Reid and Walker (2003), Schneider (2002), Stadler (2003), Campbell (2003), and Delius and Glaser (2005) who have to various extents resorted to the explanatory paradigms of denial and stigma to make sense of the powerful influence that HIV/AIDS seems to have on the ways in which people talk – or more commonly don't talk – about it.

One of the main objectives of peer education in southern Africa is to combat what has been termed as “communal denial” (Lwanda 2003: 122). An important distinction must be made here between this communal denial, a term coined by Lwanda to describe the situation in Malawi, and what might be called “individual denial”. The former has been used to refer to concerted efforts, allegedly made by communities, to suppress the reality of increasing deaths brought on by AIDS, and I use the term, critically, in this context. The latter refers to individual, cognitive processes through which an HIV positive person may delay acceptance of their status. These processes have been discussed comprehensively in the medical literature (see, for example, Soler-Viñolo *et.al* 1998) and they undoubtedly play into wider communal processes of denial. Nonetheless I do not use an individualist definition in the argument that follows, nor do I employ the notion of denial as it was used in Chapter 4 to analyse the South African government’s avoidance of the issue in terms of neo-liberal economic policy or a reaction to racist colonial stereotypes of African sexuality.

I suggest here that, to understand why so many people choose not to talk openly about HIV/AIDS in rural South Africa it is crucial to look beyond notions of shame and stigma. This is not to reject the importance of these concepts, but rather to suggest that they must be contextualised within the wider framework of ways in which death in general, *not* exclusively that which is AIDS related, is avoided as a topic of public discussion. The avoidance of open conversation about HIV/AIDS – and about the deaths it causes – cannot usefully be characterised as collective denial. Such a characterisation conceals distinctly more than it reveals.

Notions of secrecy must be central to this analysis and yet the classic sociological account of secrecy by Simmel (1950) has made remarkably little impact on the AIDS literature. A reason for this may be that Simmel essentially analyses secrets in an overtly functionalist manner as tools for the maintenance of group cohesion – restricting the distribution of knowledge to specific groups over time as, for example, we saw with ritual knowledge through the *Vhusha*. Recent anthropological work on secrecy and silence that has not been connected to the AIDS literature has, however, taken more

notice of Simmel's work.⁹¹ This has demonstrated its strengths and weaknesses whilst raising remarkably similar themes as those concerned with AIDS. Mookherjee (2006), for example, provides an analysis of the extent to which the rape of certain women, socially recognised as "war heroes", remains a "public secret" in Bangladesh that is intrinsically connected to structural power arrangements whilst being widely known and yet rarely spoken of. The notion of a public secret is particularly apt to AIDS in South Africa, and I adopt Mookherjee's term intermittently with Stadler's notion of public silence (see below). West (2003) raises similar issues writing of the silence endured by survivors of torture in colonial Mozambique and the subsequent failure of FRELIMO to provide official spaces for them to speak about, and thus heal, their experiences of brutality. This has not stopped them from speaking about it "at home", however, and when such men talk about their experiences now, West argues they are mourning their own deaths. To some extent this parallels the situation I will describe in this chapter, where private and public domains entertain very divergent ways of talking and not talking.

The disinclination to discuss AIDS openly in South Africa has been thought of in terms of public silence – a concept used recently by Jonathan Stadler (2003) who conducted research in the Bushbuckridge region of the Limpopo Province, approximately 250 kilometres south of Venda. He used the term to compare ways in which AIDS can be privately acknowledged by families as a cause of illness or death, but publicly shrouded in secrecy. Although this term, like the notion of a public secret, remains problematic for several reasons that we shall return to, it is nonetheless useful as a starting point from which we may reach a more composite understanding of the social processes involved.

Wood and Lambert (forthcoming) favour the term "indirect communication" to analyse complex processes of coding through which, they argue, the word AIDS is avoided in South Africa's Eastern Cape to circumvent disrespect for mourning families.⁹² Connected to this, Stadler highlights the "distinct symbolic resonance" (*ibid*: 133)

⁹¹ See Robbins (2001) for a recent account of secrecy in relation to a millenarian movement's notion of time and narrative in Papua New Guinea.

⁹² More general studies of AIDS stigma have been offered by Stein (2003), Reid and Walker (2003), Deacon *et al.* (2004), Deacon (2006) Parker and Aggleton (2003). They draw to varying extents on cross cultural and trans-historical comparisons with other illnesses (plague, leprosy, cancer, tuberculosis) through which AIDS is intimately bound to sex, weight loss and unsightly lesions (cf. Sontag 1990).

between AIDS, witchcraft, poison, and pollution. This has been postulated to demonstrate how greed, suspicion, jealousy, and insatiable sexual and material desires, have all combined to produce what Ashforth (2002, 2005) calls an AIDS induced epidemic of witchcraft in the post-apartheid era. Paul Farmer (1990, 1994, 2006) has provided a lucid account of similar processes in Haiti, in which he discusses the way in which sorcery and voodoo have been invoked in patterns of accusations around cases of AIDS. The similarities between the Haitian cases and the Soweto ethnography provided by Ashforth are striking. Both have made important contributions to our understanding of AIDS through the paradigms of witchcraft and sorcery, in which the illness can be meaningfully sent by a jealous enemy. Farmer's wide reaching analysis was pioneering in the field, and made connections through a "geography of blame" that encompassed the political and (unequal) economic relationship between Haiti and America, and the individual accusations made in the village of Do Kay. Despite a tendency to reduce the spread of AIDS and sorcery accusations to patterns of economic inequality, Farmers work leaves the reader with a solid historical and political account of AIDS in Haiti, and (more than any southern African accounts including the present one) reflects the humanity of his informants in an "anthropology of suffering". These comparisons are important, but I shall leave them to the side for the time being.

Whilst much of this recent research has mapped out some of the social processes of secrecy, silence, and notions of respect in the context of AIDS related deaths, it has failed to explain adequately what this so-called public silence *means* for those who choose not to discuss AIDS openly in their everyday conversations. By extension, the existing literature on the subject has failed to propose a convincing explanation as to why the silence may have developed in the first place, why it continues in the face of widespread HIV/AIDS education campaigns, and what the relationship between these may be.

Clearly, then, the general reluctance to discuss HIV/AIDS openly in the region has been well documented, and my experiences during fieldwork reflected and confirmed this established avoidance of open conversation. This was, however, accompanied by an

abundance of backstage and privately conducted rumour and gossip.⁹³ One of the most prevalent, and by far the most intriguing, of these rumours was that condoms caused AIDS. It was said frequently by groups of men and women of various ages that condoms were infected with the virus. The particulars of this accusation varied, but the most common rationale was that if condoms were filled with warm water and left overnight or in sunlight, small worms would hatch inside them, and contact with these worms' eggs during intercourse resulted in the transmission of HIV. The worms are said to be too small to be detected by the naked eye, and can not be seen through a microscope, so any scientific endeavours to prove or dispel this rumour would be futile. In personal communication with many researchers on the topic, it is clear that this idea is prevalent throughout South Africa, although the details tend to take on various characteristics. An adequate explanation for the notion that condoms cause AIDS has yet to be proposed. Towards the end of the chapter I will provide an explanation of the inherent logic in this seemingly irrational rumour. This will lead to the conclusion that the notion of condoms causing AIDS is directly related to policy making based on an inadequate understanding of why people do not speak openly about AIDS, and the subsequently misguided breaching of this so-called public silence.

Before we can proceed with this, however, two contextual observations should be made. Firstly, the literal and figurative invisibility of causes of death in the Venda region is significant for the argument that follows. For example, on receiving news of someone's death, it would be unthinkable to enquire publicly about the cause: the bearer of the news would never admit, in public, to knowing the answer. Should the conversation veer towards this topic, vague euphemisms and obfuscation are used consistently between friends and acquaintances in all manner of public social situations. This is exemplified every weekday evening, between 7.30 and 8.00pm, when listeners to the hugely popular Phalaphala FM (South Africa's only TshiVenda radio station) are subjected to the roll-call of people who have died the previous week, who will be buried the coming weekend. This information is supplied directly to the radio station by grieving families, and the daily intimations follow a strict, basic formula: name of the deceased, place and date of birth, employment history, names of surviving close kin, date of death, time and place of prayer meetings and funeral. On *no* occasion is a cause of death

⁹³ I engage with the anthropological literature on rumour and gossip once the core ethnography of this section has been presented.

alluded to. Further examples of this reluctance to reveal the cause of death include two academic theses, written by Venda anthropology students in the late 1990s, that took as their topics "A changing view of Death in a Venda Village" (Muvhango 1998) and "The role of Women in Burial Societies" (Rambau 1999). Having read them in detail, hoping of finding an early reference to AIDS, I found only that in both documents there was not one single reference to any cause of death in the numerous, but selectively detailed, case studies.⁹⁴

After death, the secrecy is likely to intensify; most notably with the "cause of death" entry on the death certificate. South Africa does not yet have a national register of AIDS deaths, nor is it a notifiable disease (Stadler 2003: 129; Schneider 2002) and although pneumonia or TB are commonly stated by the coroner, AIDS related deaths are often recorded officially in much more nebulous terms. I give four examples of people I personally knew to have died of AIDS related illness:

Male, born 1965: cause of death: Hypertensive stroke.

Female, born 1978: cause of death: Natural Causes.

Female, born 1975: cause of death: Gastroenteritis

Male, born 1970: cause of death: Chronic illness.

This pattern of ambiguity continues at funerals, during which religious and community leaders inevitably improvise to variations on the same theme; "a long sickness", "an illness", "an ailing/failing physique" or a "recent lack of health". This phenomenon has been incorporated into Solomon Mathase's song that I discussed in the previous chapter (Appendix B: lines 119-121):

*A huna ane a nga takadza
shango lothe
Kani ha ndi zwone zwo itaho
uri vhafunzi vha zwifhe
mavhidani*

No one can ever please
the whole world
Maybe this is what causes
ministers to tell lies
at the graveside

⁹⁴ Recall here the lyrical composition of the *Ludodo* through which initiates in the *Vhusha* (Chapter 3) attempted to incorporate AIDS into the ritual curriculum. Following instruction to talk about things that are prohibited in conventional conversation, they immediately invoked detailed knowledge of deaths and poisonings.

Nonetheless, this is not the situation that has been reported in other parts of South Africa. Wood and Lambert (forthcoming) point out that at Xhosa funerals in the Eastern Cape, religious leaders make a customary "cause of death" speech at the grave side, and that other causes of death may be mentioned so long as AIDS is avoided. Also, in Bushbuckridge, Stadler (*ibid*: 129) has noted that mourners at a funeral referred in comparatively more explicit terms to 'OMO' (a popular brand of washing powder with three letters), or 'a House In Vereeniging' – spelling out H-I-V without explicitly saying it. It should be emphasized that whilst this was not the case in Venda, and whilst these two examples allude to quite different social processes, they nonetheless raises important and difficult questions that relate to degrees of separation between codes of insinuation and the explicit naming of a cause of death, to which we will return in due course.

The congregations at funerals I attended in Venda, like those discussed by Stadler, were generally aware of the fact that their friend or relative had been HIV positive and had died from an AIDS related illness. As Wood and Lambert suggest, the references made to "sickness" and "many *cherries*" to some extent constitute a code within which AIDS related mortality can be spoken about respectfully in public without ascribing a specific cause of death and thus without invoking social stigma against the deceased or their family. Although this is important to recognise, I suggest here that such arguments avoid a crucial wider question: *why* does the naming of a specific cause of death invoke social stigma?

The second – and closely related – contextual point to be recognised is the widely held belief throughout southern Africa that *no death* (with the occasional exception of the very old or very young) is natural (cf. Liddell *et al.* 2005: 693; Ashforth 2005: 80). All but the most devout mainline Christian families will harbour suspicions that someone was responsible for their relative's early passing. Talking about Shona conceptions of death in Zimbabwe, Aschwanden states that "serious diseases or death are, as a *rule*, ascribed to people or spirits." (1987: 17 my italics). Likewise, in Soweto, "any death" according to Ashforth (2005: 70) "is an occasion for the speculation of witchcraft."

Whereas in the pre-colonial past this tension may have been relieved through the public accusation of witchcraft, accusing another of being a witch is (and has been under the Suppression of Witchcraft Act since the 1930s), illegal. This has led to a widely felt but

largely unarticulated anxiety that although there are growing instances of unnatural deaths, the historically conventional recourse to justice remains prohibited (cf. Geschiere 1997 in Cameroon). Indeed, as authors such as Niehaus (2001a, 2001b) and Ashforth (2002) have shown, it is not uncommon for people in post-apartheid South Africa to believe that the state is actively involved in protecting witches by continuing the prohibition against accusations. Of course this has not prevented families in mourning from harbouring suspicions, rather it has pushed the accusations underground and instead of being relatively public, they have become very private secrets. In this way, the general avoidance of open conversation about causes of death is closely related to witchcraft accusations. As Makhulu has commented recently of everyday life in post-apartheid Cape Flats, "even speech runs the risk of attracting great mischief...public meetings, and even casual conversation on the street, [have] become the subject of strict self-regulation" (2004: 242).

The Case of Seven Days Poison: "Big News and No News".

Poison: An Introduction

Tshivenda speakers use several words to describe poison, depending on the source of the substance and the social context of the conversation. *Vhutungu* refers exclusively to poison from the natural world such as a snake or spider venom. Although an unfortunate person may be poisoned by *vhutungu*, for example by standing on a spider or being stung by a wasp, this class of poison is rarely used with intent by humans to poison another person. One exception to this is when the animal is believed to have been *sent by* a witch – underlining the distinction made earlier between proximate and ultimate causes of illness (Chapter 5).

The descriptive terms for poison which is not of the natural order include *mulimo* (lit. evil drug; as in the phrase *u na mulimo* – he kills people in secret/he is not to be trusted), and *tshefu*, although these are widely seen as "deep" Tshivenda words which are used mostly by elders or in the royal dialect in company of a king. The most commonly used words during my fieldwork for poison that does not occur naturally as venom but which can be obtained for the purpose of harming someone or something, was *mushonga* or *muti*. *Mushonga* literally means medicine, drug or anything imbued with magic, but it is

a highly ambiguous and versatile category with a diverse array of applications in everyday life (see for example Ashforth 2000, 2005; Niehaus 2001a; McGregor 2005; Engelke 2005). Biomedical treatments such as penicillin, antiretroviral drugs, prophylactics, even spectacles and hearing aids are referred to colloquially as *mushonga*. In its most common form in Venda, *mushonga* is usually a collection of herbs, roots, twigs or dried animal parts which can be kept close to the body as an amulet, or hidden in the homestead (mostly in the thatched roof above the entrance to the main hut) for the purposes of ritual/spiritual protection. It can be passed down from specific ancestors or bought from an *inyanga* and can be used towards positive or negative ends.

In its least common but most notorious form, *mushonga* can be the organs of a human body, taken during a '*muti* murder' in which the victim has body parts removed whilst he or she remains alive, usually being left to die from loss of blood. Human *muti* is widely believed to be very powerful in the pursuit of financial wealth or political influence and has reportedly been used in Venda since pre-colonial times (Kirkaldy 2005: 177, 219-222). At various times in recent history, before and during the transitory stage from apartheid to democratic governance, periodic escalations of *muti* murders in Venda have received limited academic and governmental attention (Le Roux 1988; Ralushai 1996). Their wider occurrence throughout South Africa has been theorised by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) as part of an "occult economy" through which magical means are manipulated towards material ends (see below).⁹⁵

⁹⁵ The commercial availability of human body parts from corrupt hospital workers and undertakers is a lucrative activity in South Africa. In 2004, an SABC expose in the series *Carte Blanche* not only ascertained the extent of this trade but pointed to Venda, and Tshivenda speakers, as central in it. Such "cold" body parts, however, do not have the power of "hot" muti, taken whilst the victim is still alive. During my fieldwork, 6 such murders were reported in Venda. There is a massive element of risk involved in committing ritual murder. If the user of human muti is caught, their life will be at immanent risk from lynch mobs that descend on the homesteads of suspects and apportion a variety of punishments. If police are seen to be inefficient in their capture, or involved in a conspiracy of silence to protect the murderers, then large scale protest may escalate into rioting in which roads are blocked and shops looted. Recently, the Venda region has experienced a sudden and abrupt increase in the incidence of ritual murder reminiscent of the late 1980s, and this has led to numerous calls for independent investigations into the matter. Whilst there is no space here for an adequate discussion of this phenomenon, or its recent increase, it would appear to be connected to a simultaneous flurry of xenophobic activity against illegal Zimbabwean migrants and possibly also fluctuations in the local politics of several Apostolic Faith Mission churches. There has been extensive local media coverage of this. See articles, letters and archives at www.emirror.co.za.

Mushonga, then, is a term which can mean various things in different social and historical contexts. Nonetheless, the diverse manifestations of *mushonga* outlined above, except where the term is used to describe biomedical treatment, have one important property in common: secrecy. Herbs from an *inyanga* may be hidden with sacred objects, in a grass roof, or carried surreptitiously in a pocket. If *mushonga* fails to attract the desired wealth, female, or good luck, then an *inyanga* may explain to the unsatisfied client that the medicine was not adequately hidden. The power of *mushonga*, as we shall see, ultimately lies in the web of secrecy that surrounds it, as is evident in the abundance of gossip and rumour through which attempts are made to explain its origin and efficacy.

In the spate of alleged poisonings to which I now turn, the poison at the centre of the controversy became known as Seven Days, after the length of time a victim could expect to live after ingesting it. Although the precise nature or source of Seven Days never became public knowledge, competing explanations circulated through rumour and gossip. The local Mirror newspaper and radio presenters on Phalaphala FM commented and contributed to this, but the silence on the ground that reflected a pattern of not talking *openly* about Seven Days persisted until the panic had passed. It was big news and no news simultaneously. Then, as I was told one day in late 2005 after raising it with a friend in conversation, it had become "old news".

The difference between an act of witchcraft and Seven Days poisoning should perhaps be emphasized here. The occult processes of witchcraft (*vhuloi*), through which a witch (*muloi*) or his/her familiars can consecrate their own success or another's downfall, were seen in stark contrast to the physical placing of deadly poison for another's consumption. Of course, it *may* be a suspected witch who was accused of the deed, but the deed itself was not seen as an act of witchcraft. It was an act of cold blooded murder (*vhuvhulai* – murder, *muvhulai* – murderer, *u laya* – to kill, *u via* – ritual murder).

Seven Days: Early Gossip

I first became aware of Seven Days in August 2004. Florence, a friend of mine who has a steady job as a domestic worker for a white family, was finishing up early on a Friday afternoon. Knowing that she dreads the 30 minute walk uphill, through the forest to the

main road where she meets her taxi, I suggested that she need not rush as I would give her a lift home. I was heading in that direction anyway and I genuinely enjoyed my conversations with her. She accepted the lift and headed off to the garage where she washes after the day's work in a deep clay sink before donning smart clothes for the public eye. Florence is almost 50 years old, and her husband lives in Johannesburg with a second wife. He occasionally comes home to be with his children, but does so with the younger, prettier wife who then sleeps in the marital bedroom. This cuts Florence to the bone, but she is powerless to change it – and even if she could, the upheaval would simply draw more attention to her embarrassing, but not uncommon, situation. She has four children, and her two teenage daughters both have a child to the same boy, who is a promising star in a local football team. The daughters have dropped out of school to care for their children and both collect government child support grants. With Florence's wage, her husband's remittances and the state welfare the family is not poor, and is comfortable enough to be building a three room extension to their house, even if it has taken three years.

I could tell that Florence was going to a funeral that weekend by the smarter than usual frock that she carefully tucked under her as she climbed up into my *bakkie*. "Who is it this time?" I asked. She snorted at my cheeky opening gambit. "A relative, down past Tshakhuma." As I have mentioned, my habit of offering lifts to friends and strangers was more than altruistic. In the absence of an audience, notepad and tape recorder such conversations felt more natural, but even with friends like Florence, whom I have known for six years, talking about the dead was always a risky business.

Slowly the details of her story emerged. Florence's sister's daughter (*muduhulu*)⁹⁶ had passed away the previous weekend after her own wedding celebration two weeks previous. She had married a reasonably wealthy local man with many shares in a prominent local bus company. The groom, who was a known womaniser, had many secret wives (*mafarakano*; see Chapter 5) and some of them were present at the ceremony. One, Florence explained, was helping with the preparation of the wedding meal. Exactly a week after the wedding, the bride died whilst vomiting white froth and

⁹⁶ The actual relation was Florence's fathers' third wife's second daughter's first born daughter. Florence is from her father's second wife, and within the terms of Venda extended family, a sister's daughter is called *muduhulu*.

blood. She had been sick since the ceremony, but perfectly healthy before it. The *mufarakono* who had been helping to cook was now nowhere to be found, and it was assumed that she, motivated by jealousy, had poisoned the bride.

This story in itself was by no means extraordinary in that alleged poisonings, often involving jealous lovers, are a regional trope. The first words of advice proffered to me by Harold Lemke, founder of the CPC, explained that I was not to worry; "if a Venda wants to kill you, you will not be shot, but you will be poisoned." To a certain extent, the threat of being poisoned is a constant reality in Venda and according to Stayt (1931) has been for a considerable period of time. Writing with specific reference to the elaborate tasting etiquette of royal courtyards in the late 1920s, he comments that "as in the old days this [poisoning] was a favourite method of disposing of an enemy, every chief lives in constant dread of meeting his death by poison." (*ibid.*: 204). The communal manner in which food is eaten by men in public is justified in symbolic terms of emic group politics centred on suspicion and the need to engender trust. Indeed, towards the end of my fieldwork, in July 2005, I myself was the target of an attempted poisoning. Fortunately, amid the chaos of a feast, a vigilant friend who became suspicious warned me not to swallow the next mouthful of my beer, but to taste it for anything different. The sharp, metallic, sulphurous taste was clearly toxic and left me salivating profusely for hours.

Radio dramas and the Tshivenda soap opera 'Muvhango' regularly write poisonings into their scripts. On my regular visits to the local prison, *Matatche*, to visit an old friend incarcerated for murdering his wife, I was struck by the manner in which guards would accept food parcels for inmates only if the visitor ate a portion first. A friend who works there explained that this became protocol during the 1980s when the incidence of politically inspired killings in the area was particularly high. Legendary accounts tell of elaborate plots through which numerous high profile politicians, activists and traitors met their death by being dealt a fatal dose of toxin. As we saw in Chapter 2, the period from 1979 until 1994, when Venda was an "independent" homeland, provided a political climate saturated with long standing grudges, fragile new alliances and underground revolutionary movements in which many politicians are said to have been poisoned. Within this context as well as during the period since Venda's re-aggregation into the new South Africa, the suspicious deaths of many traditional leaders, successful

businessmen and (un)successful lovers have been told in detailed narratives that conclude with some form of poisoning. Again, these are related not in the lexicon of witchcraft, but of murder.

Florence's story, however, got more animated as she told me of two other deaths in the area that same week of healthy people who had died exactly one week after attending a funeral together. She was in the process of explaining how dangerous it was becoming to eat at public functions when we stopped to collect an elderly neighbour who was heavily laden with firewood. The tiny old woman squeezed up next to us in the front cab of my truck and the conversation changed swiftly to pleasantries. Florence did not have to explain that she could not be heard talking with me about death and poison. She later explained it through the proverb "*U vhonwa zwi a vhonwa, zwi ila u amba*" which roughly means "there are certain things you are permitted to see or have an opinion on, but it is prohibited to be heard talking about them".

Seven Days in the Beer Hall

On the Friday night after Florence related her tale, I met as usual with my drinking buddies at Mapitas, the local tavern. Mapitas is advertised as a "complex", and qualifies for this title as it boasts a well stocked (if overpriced) shop, a payphone, butchery, tavern and a cooking *braai* area at the back nestled under huge, old trees. Mapitas is situated at the bottom of the main road which cuts up into the Thate Vondo tea plantation (see Map 3), a large enterprise employing up to 3000 seasonal tea pickers which, during the period of my fieldwork, was closing down.

Just behind Mapitas, the modest *Mutshindudi* River provides young girls and women with the water for evening cooking and washing, which is laboriously carried up the hill in plastic containers to homesteads in the surrounding villages. As evening sets, the men who drink take up their places in the tavern with their friends. Some play cards, others partake in animated games of chess or the Venda version of solitaire, *mufhufha*. My group of friends at Mapitas, an eclectic mix of farmers, teachers, musicians, traffic police, artists, full time *mahape* drinkers and civil servants, preferred just to talk – and

inevitably argue – the night away.⁹⁷ The conversation would jump between anything from football to women, chiefs to riddles, Johannesburg to Scotland, and, inevitably, back to women. The only females who were around were girlfriends – *cherries* (actual or potential) and although sex workers dropped in occasionally, it was not a regular spot for them. A polite, respectful man does not drink beer with his wife in public, and *Mapitas* tavern, as my father was told during a visit, is a “gentlemen’s bar”; frequented by men and generally avoided by youngsters who prefer the more lively night spots towards Thohoyandou.

It was still light outside when I saw the *Mirror* article on the counter of the butchery. The headline read:

“TAPS OF POISON”.
‘Mysterious tablets in water taps spark poison scare’

Itsani – Mystery and secrecy surround an alleged attempt to poison the communities of Itsani, Maniini, Tswinga, Tshakhuma and Muledane during past weeks, after it was allegedly found that unknown tablets were inserted in some of the public taps in the area. According to several members of the communities, they discovered unidentified white and red poison pills in their public taps. Although they are taking as many precautions as possible, the community members are living in fear for their lives...The tablets are called “seven-days tablets” in the community which means you will live for only seven days after consuming one...community members are living in fear and were pleading with anyone with information regarding the poisoning of their water to report it” (*Thulamela Mirror*, Friday the 27th August 2004 – see Map 4 for the geographical distribution of these villages).

I read it intently, twice, and stuffed the already ripped copy into my bag. As I was stashing the bag behind the seat of my truck, the 5 O’Clock news on Phalaphala FM was reporting the same feature. 7 days was big news, and I made a mental note to finish my conversation with Florence. The drinking circle was busy that night as it was month end and the government workers were paying off their small beer and cigarette debts to the teachers, who received their wages on the 15th of every month. Mashamba, a close friend who had received his pay bought me my first beer, and as

⁹⁷ Such a diverse group of men, differing in age, class and status would not normally be in the same drinking group. However over the course of many years, these men have joined me at *Mapitas*, initially to impart their knowledge of Venda to me. In my absence, they drink within their own peer groups, but in my presence we form a cohort.

usual delivered it unopened. If a beer is delivered already open then the bearer should take a large taste of it before handing it over. This convention serves to prove that the bottle has not been poisoned. It is common for beggars to be sent to buy beer, and they can manipulate this by returning with an open bottle, and consuming as much as possible in one gulp; to the anger of the sender and the general amusement of everyone else.

As Mashamba sat down next to me, he leant over and whispered that if I had to go to the toilet tonight I must not leave my bottle on the table. This was unusual in that the large bottles, known as *quarts* or in Tshivenda *ngolongolo* after the noise made when drinking from them, were usually shared between two or three of us. I whispered back asking why, and he answered saying that tonight, we would just go at the same time. As the night progressed I waited with anticipation for the discussion to turn to the front page story. I rarely raised topics of conversation at *Mapitas*, choosing instead to participate in whatever was on the agenda. But the heightened state of alert in the group that night was starting to make me uncomfortable. I noticed that some of the guys were even sitting with their thumbs firmly capped onto the top of their bottle, and, eventually, I asked why. Although I assumed that everybody knew the answer to this question, I wanted to know more about it. There was no response to my question, and my discomfort grew.

Mashamba signalled that we should go to the toilet (which consists of a pungent brick wall), where he scorned me for asking such a question in public. As one of my closest friends, he took pride in ensuring that I was fluent in Tshivenda and flawless with male protocol, and I protested that I was unaware of having breached the code. "Some things," he said "we just *do not talk about*. It is very dangerous to know too much about these things". Then, as if to contradict himself, he whispered to me that he had overheard people talking on the taxi, saying that Seven Days had originated in a mortuary run by a Shangaan outside Sibasa. Body parts (spinal chords) were being ground into a paste and then left to dry in the sun. It was this deadly mixture, in powder or tablet form, that people were calling Seven Days. One of the men we were drinking with worked as a driver for that very company and although Mashamba doubted that we were in immanent danger, he said we must be very careful. "These guys can even hide that *mushonga* under their fingernails". By the time we got back to the circle, the driver

in question had left for a night spot towards Sibasa. Mashamba looked at me with a "told you so" expression, and the subject was dropped.

Seven Days in the Village

September 2004 was a particularly hectic time in my host village of Fondwe. Chief Rathogwa had decided to hold a celebration that would coincide with the national public holiday on the 1st of October. The public holiday was in recognition of Heritage Day, and Fondwe was to observe this by organizing its own Fondwe Day. The plans included a variety of traditional dancing, praise poetry, a small beauty pageant, many speeches from prominent community members and, inevitably, a feast. In the month leading up to Fondwe Day our homestead was the centre of attention as people came and went at all hours of the day making arrangements and delivering notes for my host, Zwiakonda, who is the official messenger to his elder brother, Chief Rathogwa. Then disaster struck.

Someone reported to Zwiakonda that he had discovered his dogs and chickens dead, with white foam coming from their mouth. His neighbour, an elderly man, had found white powder under the rim of his water tank and when he fed it to a stray dog with bread, it died within the hour. The news that Fondwe had been targeted by Seven Days spread rapidly.

Clearly concerned that his planned feast could backfire with horrific consequences, Chief Rathogwa held an emergency meeting of the royal council. It was agreed that on the following Sunday the weekly public meeting (*khoro*) should be upgraded to an emergency *tshivhidzo*, and that all the old ladies from the village would be summoned and interrogated by the chief or a member of the council as to what they knew. Old women, it was generally agreed, knew everything that was going on, and would appreciate the urgency of the situation with a mature wisdom. It is also possible that the chief suspected certain elderly women of involvement.

That Sunday, as planned, the *khoro* convened at 6.30am. As we arrived, the customary distribution of *mahaphe* beer was conspicuous by its absence, and men of all ages and ranks slowly went inside the large council hut. The seating arrangement consists of

concentric wooden benches around the inside wall, and a stage on the right hand side where the chief sits on a throne with two chairs on either side of him – one for each of the four headmen. It was a full house, and some men were forced to sit on the cement floor. As we took our seats inside and begun the preliminary business, the old women began to gather outside. The chief addressed us and reiterated the seriousness of the situation, waving a copy of the newspaper article to reinforce his point. He spoke of the recent attempted poisonings and openly criticised the secretive manner in which they were being treated as "dangerous and child-like".

He was clearly concerned that Seven Days would take a victim at the forthcoming celebrations, and was determined to thwart what he saw as warning aimed specifically at his power. Before calling the old ladies, he asked if any of the men present knew anything. Roughly five minutes of total silence passed – the only noise coming from men readjusting their posture to get comfortable on the thin wooden benches or to take the occasional nip of snuff. He then asked what kind of *mushonga* Seven Days was, and again was met with silence. Shaking his head into his right hand, he summoned the old ladies with his outstretched left arm.

Unless they are called for a specific purpose, women do not attend the council, and in the presence of the chief, they entered on their knees. They shuffled in, keeping their heads bowed towards the floor, and filled the space that had been prepared for them in the middle of the circle. For almost 2 hours, the old women were subjected to a mix of elaborate praise and sharp questioning, but the flattery failed in its thinly veiled task, and none of them were willing to fill the pregnant silences with the desired information. Seemingly angry and frustrated, the chief stormed out of the council hut, pledging to everyone present that he would discover those responsible for bringing the poison to Fondwe, and that they would be dealt with severely. We were then informed that the meeting was over.

Far from being an error of Chief Rathogwa's judgment, the holding of an emergency council was his method of returning the warning to whoever was threatening his power. When I interviewed him some weeks later, he explained:

I knew that my people would not talk on that day, in front of me and everyone else, but I also knew that they would listen, and they did [listen] because no one was poisoned at our celebration. These things, you must understand, there are some things we just do not talk of here in Venda. That is why there is so much of this gossip...It has been like that for a long time (Interview at Fondwe Musanda, with Chief Rathogwa on 28/12/04).

Researching and Explaining Seven Days

Over the course of the next few months, many clandestine stories circulated about people who had attended funerals, weddings, parties, or beer halls and died within Seven Days of consuming food or drink there. My research assistant and I endeavoured to establish the source of and any patterns in the rumour. The original plan was to start at the hospital where the victims in the Mirror article had been taken, and to track down the media liaison officer who was quoted as saying that samples of the poison were being tested to confirm what substance had been used. Colbert, my assistant, completely refused to get involved in this, arguing that it would appear as if he was venturing to procure a sample for his own use. As we will see, this was much more than a feeble excuse.

We resolved to solve this by going together to the royal courts of the villages mentioned in the article and ask permission to talk with people in their own homes. He agreed on the condition that I organised someone to invite and introduce us to the different areas, as it would appear dubious were we to appear unannounced. I contacted a long standing colleague of mine from a youth NGO who was an active member of the civic association at the village of Tswinga. After waiting a week for his response, he contacted me to explain that he had made inquiries and that it would be frivolous for us to go there, insisting that no one knew anything about Seven Days in his village. I tried several other contacts in Tshakuma (where I knew many HIV/AIDS peer educators) and Muledane (where a friend had a secret lover), and we drove without invitation to Itsani where I played in a soccer team in 1995, but no one was prepared to admit to us that they knew anything. Even the media liaison officer at the hospital and the local Police refused to furnish me with any more information, claiming to be "bound to agreements of confidentiality".

Indeed, Seven Days was no news. And yet it was big news simultaneously. This avoidance of open conversation had evolved in parallel to a willingness, by certain people and institutions, to talk openly about the suspected poisonings. Newspapers and radios reported it widely. A late night phone-in show on Phalaphala FM devoted an entire evening to it, but the few people who ventured to phone and comment refused to reveal their identities. Village leaders raised it at council meetings, and local politicians were critical of it in various addresses to the public and in ward meetings. Those with spiritual authority such as traditional healers and several prophets of African Independent Churches professed to sacrosanct knowledge of a panacea either through herbal antidotes, all-night prayer sessions or holy water. Zwirombe musicians, who live in the human world but have privileged access to the ancestral one (Chapter 5), wrote it into song texts that were performed in beer halls throughout Venda;

*Ngoho Mudzimu mara vhathu vhange
vha tou khou u divha uri
iyi vhege maduvha ano
Kha thogomele, vhana wa mavu,
Ri dzula ri tshi lovha maduvha!*

Really; but it seems everyone
just wants to know about
the week [7 days] these days
Take care, children of the soil
It seems just living can kill you these days!

(Solomon Mathase, '*Hu na makhobo fano*' -There is danger here).

And yet among the general public it was referred to strictly in whispers. Some of my contacts in the villages got back to us with anonymous snippets of gossip, explaining that they wanted to help my research but they didn't *really* know anything. Recognition of this widespread reluctance to speak came as a relief, removing my initial suspicion that it was me, specifically, to whom people did not want to speak. Meanwhile, we were picking up on the wealth of gossip and rumour that was circulating quietly between friends and families at home, in taxis, at beer halls, in churches and at washing places in the shallow rivers. There were very distinct patterns in this backstage whispering. It consisted mostly of clustered speculation and allegation through which specific groups and things were named as responsible for inventing, selling and using 7 days.

There is a long history of debate in anthropological literature regarding the role if gossip and rumour in sociality. Recent attempts have been made to create a distinction between gossip as "[taking] place mutually among people in networks or groups" (Stewart and Strathern 2004: 38) and rumour as "unsubstantiated information, true or

untrue, that passes by word of mouth" (*ibid.*) but the difference here does not appear to be clear or particularly helpful. Max Gluckman's (1963) classic anthropological account of gossip and scandal among Haitian villagers and others suggested that gossip is "functional" and conducive to group solidarity through the reinforcing of norms and enshrining of group membership. For Gluckman, to gossip is to be a member of the group, as for an anthropologist to understand the significance of gossip is to become relatively acculturated. In time, with the progression in anthropological theoretical concerns from the group to the individual, Gluckman's ideas were criticised. Paine (1967) argued from his Makah Indian ethnography that gossip is more about individuals seeking to forward their own interests through the denigration and exclusion of others than it is about the fortification of group solidarity. Brenneis (1984) shows both processes at play in an account of gossip in an acephalous society in which he argues that gossiping is "also an event in its self" (1984: 496) and not just "about" something else.

Clearly all three of these authors have a valid point, and in hindsight we can see the limited advantages of subscribing entirely to an 'either/or' scenario. From even a cursory look at the ethnography above, we can see the role of gossip in fostering group membership (between Mashamba and myself as he whispered his explanation for 7 days) and that this simultaneously excluded the funeral car driver and his Shangaan bosses from the group, in the promotion of our collective interest not to be poisoned. Like Blacking's dichotomy on the dual capacity of music (Chapter 5), then, this does not seem to advance our analytical capability to any significant extent.

Connecting the notions of silence, secrecy and gossip in a more fruitful manner for the current argument is the recent work of Louise White (2000). White argues that silence can often be pregnant with "eloquent assumptions" (*ibid.*: 77) about local knowledge. In response to this, gossip and rumour reveal the "intellectual world" (*ibid.*: 86) of fears, fantasies and ideas that constitute themselves around silence in the telling and re-telling of things which can not be spoken about openly. In this way, the gossip and rumour which fill our current vacuum offer an intriguing insight into the anxieties and apprehensions of contemporary life in post-apartheid Venda.

The patterns of rumoured accusations reveal what the Comaroffs might have described as part of an “occult economy”, through which global processes take on localised incarnations, but through which the seductive allure of international capitalism is eclipsed by the enduring realities of mass poverty. Through such an occult economy, magical means are invoked to manipulate the market and bring wealth to those who would otherwise be structurally excluded from it. In criticisms levelled at this idea, it has been pointed out that relatively few of those disappointed by their failure to accrue untold wealth have actually resorted to the use of magical means towards material ends, and the extent to which occult economies are characteristic only of the postcolonial era remains unclear (cf. Moore 1999). Nonetheless, the Seven Days data from Venda demonstrates that “occult economy” can be used as a useful analytical tool to further our understanding of the rumoured allegations. Although the majority of people perhaps do not engage directly with such economies in order to accrue an income, this does not prohibit them from entertaining the notion that magical means are manipulated on a daily basis to procure material ends, and to engage with global capitalism.

There were two frequently occurring explanations for 7 days that circulated through gossip and rumour. The first, as mentioned above, alleged that it was derived from human body parts, processed through a Shangaan-run mortuary. In this version of events, 7 days was a ploy to extract money from people through the costs of organising a funeral, and this was also associated with stories of hearses driving in the night to conduct their surreptitious operations. The concoction of spinal chord and secret (Shangaan) *mushonga* in pill or powder form could, it was rumoured, be purchased from the night drivers, although no one I spoke to knew how much it cost.

The second, more common explanation, suggested that it was derived from the local tea-estate, either in the form of an industrial fertilizer or the condensed residue of old, rotten, tea leaves.⁹⁸ According to this explanation, it could be purchased for extravagant prices from tea-estate workers. The Department of Trade and Industry had recently announced that the two large tea-estates established under the National Party in the early 1960s to create the illusion of development in the Venda homeland (see

⁹⁸ There is an interesting comparison here with Mark Auslander’s work in Zambia (1993). He reports that chemical fertilizer was rumoured to be used as poison by Ngoni people in Zambia.

Chapter 2) were to close. After years of generous subsidies from the apartheid government, the tea estates had eventually been exposed to global market forces under the ANC-led democratic dispensation. This radical and unexpected swing in ANC fiscal policy from left to right under the leadership of Finance Minister Trevor Manuel caught many unaware in its seemingly blatant contradiction of the Freedom Charter signed 50 years previously. However as we saw in Chapter 2, it was a result of the need to implement a neo-liberal framework that would encourage 'confidence' in the South African economy and thus a strong Rand in the international financial market (Koelble and Lipuma 2005).

This has, to a large extent, been a successful approach, but the bitter side effect (no surprise to the policy makers or those familiar with neo-liberalisation) was the rising tide of unemployment that it would entail (Daniel *et al.* 2005; Southall 2007). With the complete removal of state subsidies, the overall growth of the South African economy and subsequent increase in value of the Rand on the global currency exchange, the Venda tea-estates began recording huge losses. They simply could not compete on the global market, and in 2000 they were partly bought over by Liptons, a multinational private enterprise with tea-estates throughout southern Africa. However, before long cheaper tea became available from Malawi, Uganda and Kenya, and by 2004 the Venda tea estates were not financially viable. Liptons backed out and the government refused to provide further financial assistance. Having employed a core staff of almost 1,000 and seasonal pickers that annually reached up to 3,000, the subsequent loss of employment had severe and abrupt social, economic and political implications throughout the region.⁹⁹

In the face of a democracy that has brought more frustration with the rapid enrichment of small elites than general fulfilment, the vast majority of South Africans remain poor and unemployed. That the deadly potion believed to cause death in 7 days was thought to be readily available – for a price – from redundant tea-estate workers thus points to a series of connections between the elusive bounty of the market and the harsh reality of

⁹⁹ This has played directly into the hands of *Khosi Tshivhase*, ever the optimist, who recently announced that the Tshivhase Development Trust (TDT – see Chapter 2) has lobbied for subsidies and will provide funding and infrastructure to plant a macadamia farm on the land. This has become another string to his bow in the competition for *Khosikhulu*.

poverty. The hunger, anger and despair brought on by the redundancies, just at the time when black South Africans were being told to enjoy their freedom, culminated in a physical form that could kill quickly and secretively. But it nonetheless enriched those who sold it. Tea, the commodity whose cultivation had promised to provide a sustainable quality of life for so many, had become embroiled in an occult economy through which it morphed into a potential source of sudden death.

Nonetheless, rumours about the origin of Seven Days fail to explain *why* people felt the need to adhere to a strict, but unspoken code in which open, public dialogue was avoided. I will now answer this by looking in more detail at the so-called 'public silence' around HIV/AIDS in Venda, and the way in which it has been breached by peer educators. The connections between AIDS and Seven Days will be made on several levels, building on the foundational link that they are both intimately involved with relatively new modalities of suspicious, unnatural deaths, and as such are avoided in open conversation by the general public. This will help to illustrate the problematic implications of current AIDS policy not just for participatory AIDS education, but for the ways in which the identity of peer educators – and the mythical qualities of condoms – are constructed.

"Condoms Cause AIDS": The Breaching of Public Silence

The sections above have demonstrated that whilst 7 days was "no news" in that it was constructed as a public secret, it was simultaneously "big news" in that the media reported it, musicians sang about it, leaders raised it in public meetings and it gave rise to gossip and rumour that sought to explain the origin and efficacy of the poison. We also saw at the start of the chapter the extent to which open conversation around AIDS is avoided, and we have seen in Chapters 4 and 5 that peer educators systematically break this public silence through the weekly performance of public shows during which they sing songs and act out dramas to promote behavioural change.

At the start of 2005, a random selection of peer educators were issued with diaries and encouraged to record a regular commentary of their experiences not only of voluntarism, but of their daily lives and the micro-politics of their homesteads and

villages (see Chapter 1). One of the most salient topics to emerge from this experimental methodology was their acknowledgment of, and discomfort with, the labels attributed to them by many people in the communities where they work. I quote at length in translation from the original TshiVenda:

Quote 1

[A]s a peer educator most people look and see that I am teaching the community about AIDS and sexual illness. If we tell them, they will look and say "this one, she must be infected; she is the one who is positive". Others ask "how can you teach us about [blood] testing and counselling when you can not tell us if you have gone for the test yourself?

Quote 2

Our job really, it is not easy. Last week we went to [the village of] Dopeni for house meetings, we have not been there for some few months now. On the way walking there we were joking that the entire village will be infected now because of our absence! When we got there no one would let us past their gate, they would just hide and pretend to be not at home...they do this because they think we will infect *them!*

Quote 3

[I am] coming from the public meeting today. At least this one was better because there was a small group watching us and some youths even joined in. I really enjoyed that. We were all happy. It is so boring when no one comes to the meetings. Another group of men in the *shebeen* [beer hall] refused condoms from us, they say that "these condoms cause AIDS, if we fill them with water and leave them in the sun, you will find worms inside there, and these worms will get inside if you put on that condom, and the worms give you AIDS." They think like that, these Venda men of ours.

Quote 4

I heard women at the mill at Mandala saying we were working for the Americans, and they said that they had sent AIDS because it means the "American Institute to Destroy Sex".

The above quotes demonstrate clearly that peer educators have been socially constructed by many in their target communities as vectors of the virus that they have been charged with preventing: and that they are fully aware of this. As I argued in the previous chapter, one important explanation for this is the extent to which the folk model of sexual illness in Venda has incorporated biomedical discourse. But another, fundamental flaw in the peer education model is that it is exclusively orientated towards

encouraging young, already stigmatised, women to breach the public silence. Their public performances and home visits are acted out against the previously explained tapestry of deeply entrenched patterns of not speaking about causes of death. AIDS is but one of many potential (proximate) causes and the silence that surrounds it is to a significant extent responsible for the recent increase in peer education projects. As self-styled experts on the topic, peer educators have a detailed and very conspicuous knowledge of a suspicious and mysterious source of mortality that – like other causes of death – is rarely spoken of in public.

Through their regular, open confessions of this knowledge, they actively create an intimate connection between themselves and the virus. Combined with the existing connection from the folk model of sexual illness, it has become widely believed that peer educators are implicated in the spread of HIV. The reference to "Americans" (quote 4) speaks to the frequent visits of white (European and American) evaluation and fact finding teams representing international donor agencies. They possibly refer to my presence as well. "Americans", however, referring to the "west" in general, are also thought to be experts in the science of AIDS, and through this association are believed to be implicated in its invention, rapid distribution and devastating consequences.

By publicly naming AIDS, peer educators have ascribed it with power; they have put an easily recognizable face onto an otherwise elusive name. Of course, this is not to suggest that it remains powerless without being named openly, indeed the act of not mentioning AIDS – and other causes of death – recognises their efficacy and makes them very powerful indeed (cf. Ashforth 2005; Stewart and Strathern 2003). However, the practice of consistent public naming radically alters the dynamics of power that maintains the patterns and processes of indirect communication, and shifts the focus of attention directly to the female peer educators. They are then held responsible for mediating that power and are placed in the vulnerable situation of being potentially implicated in harbouring and distributing a source of perceived unnatural death. The very public nature of the Project Support Group programme of participatory AIDS education – and many others like it in southern Africa – leaves peer educators with no choice but to breach overtly the so-called public silence and to demonstrate their intimate knowledge on a weekly basis.

Indeed, this is their *raison d'être*. Of course, some people (such as groups of close family, close friends and those associated in some way with the health or voluntary sectors in Venda) do recognise their role as volunteers and their attempts to reduce infection rates by raising awareness. However, the majority of "men on the street" with a working knowledge of the folk model would perhaps agree with a comment my research assistant overheard on a combi-taxi as he alighted to join me at a public performance; "these women", said one old man to the other, "they just know *too* much...and the way they throw it around...how do they know these all things?...yes, they must be the ones spreading it."

The widespread assumption that they are implicated in this way impinges directly on their ability to perform the tasks asked of them by project funders and designers. Families often refuse them entrance to the homestead for informal house meetings (Chapter 4; quote 2) and public performances are just as likely to scare people away as to attract their participation (quote 3). The hundreds of thousands of free condoms that peer educators distribute on a daily basis can not escape this process of association, indeed they have to some extent become the pinnacle of it. If "Americans" (western biomedical scientists) are the world experts on AIDS, if they teach the peer educators (local "experts") the importance of condoms, and if both of these groups are thought to be involved in the spread of HIV, then why should the essence of what causes AIDS not also be found in the very thing that they both insist everyone must use? It would, in fact, following this logic, be very strange if it was not. The central tool of prevention – the condom – can thus be implicated symbolically in the spread of, as opposed to the prevention of, HIV. For many people, the condom they take home from a public performance remains imbued with the same powerful association that links the educators with infection – and by extension is thus often said to "cause AIDS".

Degrees of Separation

The ethnographic examples given above, then, outline the dynamics of two quite different phenomena. Seven Days poison, which was rumoured to emerge from a defunct tea-estate, and AIDS, that is rumoured to be an "American Institute to Destroy Sex". Both kill in very different ways. One is a white or red tablet that infects water

supplies, food or drinks, and will run its deadly course within a week. The other is a mysterious virus that kills very slowly and can be passed on during sex or even through the worms that many people believe lie dormant in and on sealed condoms. Both, however, are believed to be equally fatal causes of death. A form of "public silence" developed around both of them that reflected the general avoidance of discussing openly *any* cause of death.

The refusal to mention AIDS as cause of death, or the proclivity elsewhere in South Africa to refer to it euphemistically out of respect for grieving families, as discussed by Stadler (2003) and Wood and Lambert (forthcoming), are thus not anomalous. They are associated with the same social processes and pressures that prevented people from talking openly about Seven Days. Such reluctance is a safety precaution, collectively undertaken by individuals to protect them from the constant threat of guilt by association. If someone was to have come forward with information about Seven Days in the royal council hut or in the beer hall, or had in other ways made him/herself a public "expert" on the topic, then it is highly likely that s/he would have been suspected of implication in the poisoning. My research assistant's refusal to enquire about 7 days at the hospital was based upon the fear of being seen as attempting to procure a sample for their own use. "Why else would I want knowledge of such things," he asked me "unless I wanted to make it or use it against you?" Bringing news of a death, one will never be asked about its cause.

I suggest here that by invoking silence, coded language and obfuscation, "degrees of separation" are constructed that forge and maintain a social but simultaneously metaphorical distance between an individual and the unnatural cause of another's death. The indirect communication, the refusal to name a cause of death, *is* the direct protest of innocence. Wood and Lambert are thus correct to suggest that avoidance of the term AIDS circumvents a social stigma being attached to the family of the deceased. But the central reason for this avoidance is that it creates the crucial social distance between those who remain silent and the death itself, thus refuting any potential involvement in it. The act of refusing to name AIDS, then, is just as important for the individual making that choice as it is grounded in any motivation to protect or respect the mourning family.

It is in this context that the “fictitious kinship” invoked by home based care volunteers at the CPC takes on a more discernible significance (Chapter 4). As we saw, they greet their house-bound, dying, patients as though they are visiting relatives – not treating someone for any AIDS related illness. On the approach to a homestead, and when departing, they make absolutely no open acknowledgement of the true purpose of their visit, and no one asks them to elaborate. Of course, people “know” what is going on, but such knowledge is also widely recognised as dangerous (cf. Lambek 1993), and conversation relating to it is restricted strictly to strong undercurrents of gossip. In adapting the practice of AIDS related intervention in such a way, the home based carers are constructing actively degrees of separation between themselves and the illness that will inevitably claim their patient’s life.

Perhaps this facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the mourners reported by Stadler in Bushbuckridge who used the three letters of ‘OMO’ washing powder to code the cause of death (HIV) in that instance. This is hardly a code, in that it is quite clear what is being suggested – like above, people “know” what is going on. To refer to HIV as “OMO”, in this sense, borders on the colloquial. Nonetheless, more ethnographic detail would be required to identify who said this, and in what context (was it whispered to a friend or said loudly to a stranger?) and thus to map the degrees of separation required in this case by which potential implication in the death could be negated.

This brings us close to Ashforth’s notion of an AIDS induced “epidemic of witchcraft” (2002) that he argues has emerged from the abrupt rise of mortality rates in post-apartheid South Africa. This formulation encapsulates accurately many of the dynamics through which AIDS is understood in the Venda region, throughout southern Africa and, indeed, beyond (Farmer 1994, 2006 in Haiti). However in the context of the current argument, it is not significant that deaths are caused by AIDS related illness. It is significant that deaths are caused *unnaturally*. As the example of Seven Days demonstrates, although death may not be understood as natural, we should not therefore make the assumption that the cause was witchcraft – or that someone, somehow sent it. Although the processes of production under which human body parts, rotten tea leaves or chemical fertilizer supposedly became Seven Days poison were never clearly understood, the resultant poison was not thought to be a product of witchcraft (*vhuloi*) – nor was the user seen to be a witch (*muloi*) – but rather a cold-

blooded, devious murderer (*muvhulai*). The suspected cause of death could be the physical placing of a white pill in another's water supply rather than any more mysterious or occult means.

It is important to emphasise, then, that not all death perceived as unnatural in post-apartheid South Africa is ascribed to witchcraft. Even if AIDS is suspected as the cause, then conspiracy theories of poisoning are just as likely to frame the accusations of foul play as rumours of bewitching. The recent and widely reported death of the Rain Queen Modjadji VI is a case in point here. The "sudden illness" that she died from was reported in the same articles that told of her reckless promiscuity and frequent binge drinking sessions with strangers outside the royal courtyard. At the time, it was widely rumoured that her death was AIDS related. She had withdrawn gradually from public life and reportedly become thin and weak, fuelling media driven rumours even before her death that she had developed AIDS related illness. And yet her estranged husband (a commoner whom she had broken centuries of tradition through marrying and having her second child with) was widely quoted as claiming that she had been physically poisoned – *not* bewitched. Unsurprisingly, subsequent stories connected him to the death, an accusation that he strongly denied.¹⁰⁰ But these are points for another discussion in which notions of proximate and ultimate causes of illness or death may be problematised, and should not take away from the main thrust of my argument here.

I have attempted to show in this chapter that it is misleading to think of the avoidance of open conversation around AIDS in terms of a collective denial, and that a deeper understanding of the public silence can help to explain quite unintended responses to peer education projects. It is the common desire and tendency to secretly allocate blame that is responsible for saturating this so-called public silence with meaning.

Indeed, given the data above, it may be misleading to think of the situation in terms of public silence at all. As we saw with the case of Seven Days, some institutions and individuals could and did speak openly about the controversial poisonings without incurring blame or appropriating suspicion. The media reported the case in newspapers and on the radio, but neither journalists nor their corporate bosses were implicated in

¹⁰⁰ See *Sowetan* newspaper June 14th 2005 p3, and August 8th 2005. (<http://www.sowetan.co.za>)

the controversy. Those with political power such as chiefs and headmen scolded their subjects for refusing to disclose information in the run up to village feasts, and local politicians raised it in addresses at public gatherings, but they also evaded involvement. *Tshilombe* musicians incorporated it into their songs, but their spiritual sanction and strategic claims of “madness” (Chapter 5) placed them in an ambiguous but authoritative social position beyond blame. Traditional healers and self-made AIC prophets claimed to have antidotes and protection prayers for the poison, but their powerful spiritual connections also permitted this; none of these authoritative and powerful actors were blamed for the cause of death through rumour or gossip. The social and political positions they occupy permit their public comments on suspicious forms of supposedly unnatural death at times when the general public can only whisper about it for fear of implication.

Peer educators, on the other hand, do not occupy powerful or authoritative social positions from which they may speak openly about such issues without incurring some extent of blame (see Fig. 6.1). Indeed as young, mostly unmarried women, positions of power, influence and authority are their nemeses. Against the background of an overtly gendered aetiology that blames young women for harbouring and spreading sexual illness, their public forays into participatory education act as a magnet for accusation.

This brings us back to the recurring theoretical theme raised in Chapters 3 and 5; the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and experience. Having demonstrated the importance of the links made between experience and knowledge in female initiation (Chapter 3) and the reversal of this with the assumption of experience based on extensive knowledge of biomedical approaches to blocking female fertility (Chapter 5), we can now add another layer of analysis. The ethnography presented in this chapter has demonstrated that, cutting through the trajectory between knowledge and experience, is the third variable of potential recourse to authority.

Based on the data above, it would appear that knowing about a cause of death (read open acknowledgment of) leads to potential implication in (read experience of) the fatality. Likewise, the opposite of this is also valid; no knowledge of Seven Days, like no knowledge of AIDS, is expressed through the avoidance of open conversation and is equated with lacking experience of it. The “degrees of separation” between guilt and

innocence in the cause of a death, as outlined above, are rooted in claims to authority and influence that force an individual to mediate between employing gossip or open conversation depending on their relative claims to power in a given situation (see Fig. 6.1).

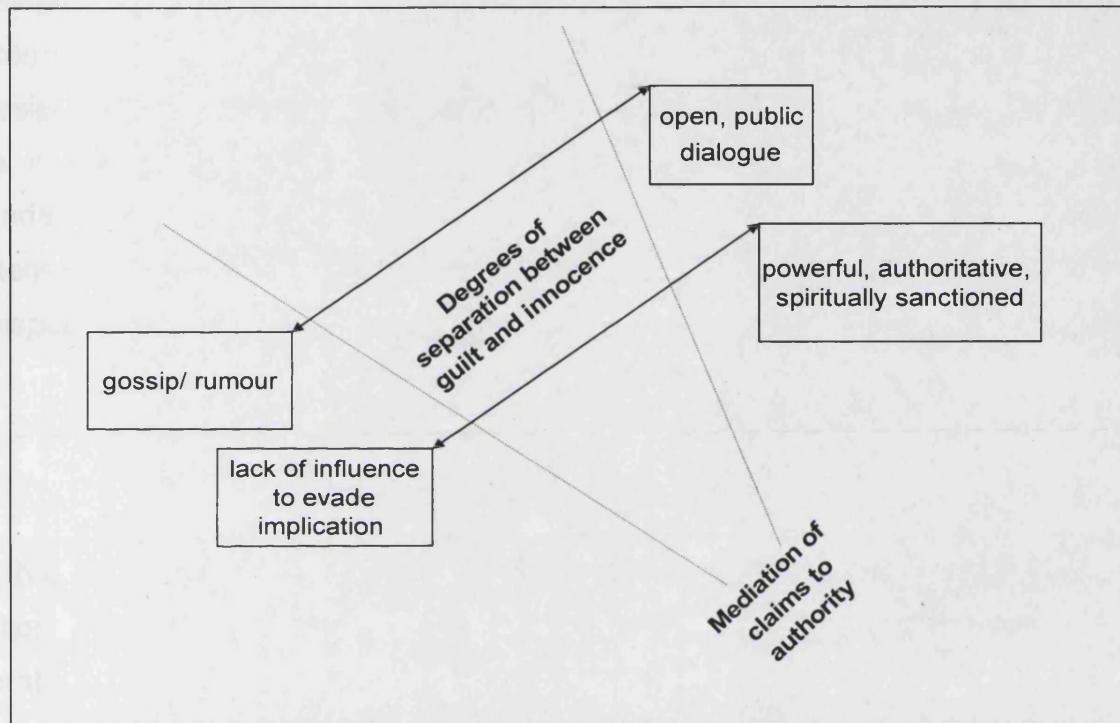


Fig. 6.1: The Parallel Dynamics in Discussing Causes of Death

It is this parallel dynamic that forced Mashamba to whisper his accusation that Seven Days originated in a Shangaan mortuary, and that permitted Chief Rathogwa to openly demand more knowledge of it. It allowed Solomon Mathase to sing about Seven Days in beer halls throughout Venda, whilst no one in the Fondwe council hut would admit to knowing anything about it. It prevented my research assistant from making enquiries, whilst the radio and newspapers reported it widely. The connection between knowledge and experience, in the open discussion of death, can be transcended by those with recourse to authority, whilst the others, in the knowledge that they would be suspected if they were seen to know "too much", have little option but to change their behaviour accordingly. It is this parallel dynamic that the peer educators breach; they engage in open conversation without the necessary power or influence to do so safely and thus

render themselves open to guilt by association where others may negate this conjunction.

Nonetheless, the majority of people in Venda are not forced by misguided interventional policy to breach this conventional means by which those who need to can avoid the use of "deadly words" (Favert-Saada 1980). Like Florence, Mashamba and my research assistant, they do not occupy positions of relative power or influence, and thus maintain extensive degrees of separation from AIDS as a cause of death through backstage gossip and rumour. This perhaps helps to make sense of Chief Rathogwa's advice to me, in which he explained; "There are some things we just do not talk about here in Venda, that is why there is so much gossip". The avoidance of conspicuous and ostentatious knowledge can negate the assumptions of experience, and engaging in whispers of gossip seems likely to fall below the radar.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that we should look beyond, without ignoring, the notion of disease stigma which dominates current debates in the anthropological literature on AIDS (Stadler 2003; Ashforth 2002, 2005; Wood and Lambert forthcoming). By an analysis of the ways in which informants reacted to a spate of alleged poisonings, I suggested that the refusal to name the cause of death is strongly connected to wider strategies designed to put in place "degrees of separation", through which persons directly seek diminished responsibility for the recent increase in what are believed to be unnatural deaths. To attribute this to a collective AIDS denial is thus unhelpful, concealing more about the social processes involved that it reveals.

The intimate association between public acknowledgment and potential implication – seen in the ethnographic accounts of *Seven Days and AIDS* – is transferred easily onto the main symbol of prevention and prophylactics are perceived not as protective agents, but as deadly participants in the on-going battle for successful social reproduction.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

On the evening before I left Venda for the immanent return to London, my host, Zwiakonda, joined me in my *Tshivhambo* hut for one last late-night chat. He had come to present me with a gift: a painstakingly prepared map of the village with family names on each plot of land written in colour coordinated code that represented the number of people who had recently died in each homestead. He had worked on this in secret, at night, for months: such a project – even if it was for an outsider's research – would surely raise suspicion that he was up to no good. The map demonstrated that, by Zwiakonda's count, one in four of the homesteads in Fondwe, including his own, had lost at least one life in the past 3 years: most of them to people under the age of 30. "I don't know what is worse", he said after presenting me with my farewell gift, "that people are becoming rich funeral directors, or that directing funerals seems to be the only secure job to have these days." Driving down the N1 highway from Venda towards Johannesburg airport the following morning, Zwiakonda's parting words rung loud in my head. The reverse side of the bill-boards that had proclaimed my warm welcome to "Africa's Eden" were now urging my swift return, but I couldn't help wondering – given this geographical representation of Fondwe's death toll – how many of the people I had befriended would be there to welcome me back again.

Zwiakonda's concerns articulate two of the most pertinent apprehensions in post-apartheid Venda; unprecedented numbers of young people are dying, whilst those who evade "sickness" struggle to find secure employment. To annunciate this lament in the effigy of funeral directors – parasitic and unwelcome, but nonetheless indispensable – struck me as evocative of the profound contradictions that map out the lived experience of this post-apartheid moment in rural South Africa. His comments represent the widespread perception that contemporary African affairs, in Venda and beyond, are caught up in an overwhelming crisis of social and sexual reproduction: a crisis that has exploited and exacerbated social cleavages along gendered and generational divides, and one that threatens to render the future as "stillborn" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 336).

In its widest sense, this thesis has been an attempt to encapsulate and analyse the internal dynamics of this perceived crisis of reproduction through an ethnographic account of AIDS in a specific local setting. It has sought to do so by bringing together three analytical threads that have not previously intersected to shed light on the epidemic; the politics of tradition and an anthropological approach to knowledge at the juncture of health related interventionism. The convergence of the three, to focus on AIDS in Venda, has raised some pertinent issues for each thread of analysis and for the understanding of AIDS in similar settings more generally.

In these concluding remarks, I want to highlight these points and the ways in which they are interconnected, but this does not necessarily amount to a “pulling together” of the threads. To paraphrase Lambek (1993: 379), things do not fully tie together and there is no hidden order beneath the surface. Indeed, if anything, the chapters in this thesis have raised more questions than they have provided neat answers. And yet it is beneath this metaphorical surface, in the spaces that lurk below the tip of the iceberg, that we have found some patterns to be important for the ways in which people in Venda understand and respond to AIDS as a pertinent threat to social reproduction in their midst. Salient amongst these patterns has been the dialectic relationship between knowledge and experience, and I devote space in these last pages to a final summary of the association between these two concepts.

The particular version traditionalism that has taken hold in post-apartheid Venda is inseparable from King Tshivhase's preoccupation with the succession struggle for paramount chieftaincy. I stressed the importance of historical processes that shape the current political economy of traditional leadership in terms of pre-colonial internecine feuds and the subsequent influence of colonial and apartheid governments that incorporated already divided chiefly structures into their systems of racially segregated governance. In the post-apartheid era, the role of chiefs in the democratic dispensation has been influenced by a global discourse whereby tradition – the *right* to tradition – is guaranteed in courts and constitutions throughout the world. Moreover, a pressing concern for the economic stability of the South African Rand, which is dependent more on the confidence of international speculative capital than it is on a centralised national fiscal policy (Koelble and Lipuma 2005), has forced the ANC led government into carving a

niche for traditional leaders in the implementation of policy orientated towards social justice whilst the government sets about implementing its neoliberal agenda.

This agenda is pervasive, but it is not all encompassing. It has given rise to aspirations towards success and wealth, encouraged by the state through policies connected to GEAR and black economic empowerment. The perceived need to partake in the new future of prosperity – to get a good job and drive a flash car – co-exists with the drive for a revival in traditional practices; legitimated because they are perceived to be “of the past”. As we saw in chapter 3, this seemingly contradictory set of principles is not necessarily experienced as ambiguous. This was personified in the image of Noriah, translating the roll-call of initiation graduates into a computerised database with the intention of writing more convincing funding proposals to donor agencies and government bodies. The “traditional” intersects with the “modern” in such ways – but at the intersection it is not necessarily experienced as anything new: it is thought of rather as making the most of an opportunity.

If the ways in which global, local and historical elements have been incorporated into processes of traditionalism have been well traversed in the literature – as well they should be – the intersection of these processes with the micro-politics of knowledge has perhaps been neglected. Kennedy Tshivhase’s well publicised claim that AIDS education has been incorporated into the *Vhusha* girls’ initiation provides a case in point here. His statement must read on different levels of intentionality. Firstly, in the most obvious terms of the current succession challenge, Tshivhase has sought to combine his impeccable struggle credentials with the promotion of African renaissance values and development projects in the region. He has to some extent been led into this strategy by the historical relationship between the royal houses of Tshivhase and Mphephu, and the increasingly autocratic party line of the ANC – which he serves as a member of parliament. The allegation that AIDS education is a part of female initiation presented Tshivhase with an ideal opportunity to court the media and engage in an act of constructing himself as a dynamic leader with the ability to nurture tradition and development; simultaneously spinning the past and the present; seeking, but not necessarily achieving, legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, the state, and the kingship.

The chiefly promotion of initiation, however, has had implications beyond the battle for paramountcy. It has bolstered the corpus of ritual knowledge upon which initiation is based and thus fortified the stratification of female hierarchies within the *Tshivhambo*. Through an ethnographic account of *Vhusha*, we saw that this resulted in the forceful rejection of the biomedical model from the initiation ceremony: not only because it appeared as an esoteric code to the ritual leaders, but more importantly because the folk model of sexual health being transferred to initiates can also be seen to offer ways that AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases can be avoided. In this way, biomedical knowledge did not only pose a threat to older women's status, but it contradicted directly the inherent wisdom of ritual, ancestral, knowledge.

Thus, proponents of the folk model would agree with *Khosi Tshivhase* that AIDS education is indeed part of female initiation in that it teaches young girls the centrality of monthly ablutions and respect for blood related taboos through which pollution can be managed and fertility maintained. At the same time, those who have the biomedical model in mind (most importantly, perhaps, members of the Nhlapo commission) would concur that such teaching is, at least in principle, a good idea. In this reading, the ritual experts at *Dopeni* and the initiates who caused controversy during *Ludodo* were both following what they understood to be chiefly instruction, but without the experience and authority to backup their knowledge, the initiates found themselves in a powerless state of liminality.

It is difficult to know whether *Tshivhase* had this in mind when making his claims – such direct questions are not permissible in his presence – but given his history of shrewd political manoeuvres it would seem quite likely that he did. Whatever the case, he would have to adjust to the reality that the secretive and gendered nature of *Vhusha* knowledge and practice would prevent it from becoming open and accessible public property. It would not easily be turned into a repository for cases of action funded by policy makers and NGOs.

Biomedicine as a Corpus of Ritual Knowledge

As we have seen, the biomedical and folk models are not incommensurable. They represent different means to what is largely a similar end: the resolution of a perceived

crisis in social and sexual reproduction. If we consider the relationship between ritual knowledge of the *Vhusha* and the folk model of *malwadze dza vhafumakhadzi* (the illnesses of women) as that between “experts” and “the man of the street” (Lambek 1993; Chapter 5), then processes of “marginal change” (Barth 2002) in the corpus can be seen in the incorporation of scientific concepts by those who have a generalised, “working knowledge” of the system. This adds a new dimension: “marginal change” is managed not only through the contestation of the “well informed citizens” (cf. Shutz in Lambek 1993) who, in this case, are the initiated women. Rather, change is managed by those on the periphery of ritual control because they are less impinged by the structural hierarchies that bind the dynamics of the *Vhusha* initiation together.

This casts some doubt on La Fontain’s claim that “ritual knowledge is antithetical to change” (1985: 189): change to the ritual corpus *can* occur, and it does not necessarily entail its dilution or loss of authenticity. On the contrary, selective and strategic incorporation of external factors can act to strengthen a corpus. Thus the incorporation of biomedical concepts into the folk model has not been random or arbitrary. Abortion and contraception have become central tenets in patterns of blame whereby they cause actively the dangerous accumulation of pollution in the female body that has, by extension, been associated with harbouring HIV/AIDS. In this way, the antinome between “traditional” and “modern” bodies of knowledge – both of which appear historically and materially quite different but yet make almost identical claims to restoring the balance of social reproduction – is, at least partially, resolved.

I have argued throughout that the relationship between knowledge and experience is central to an understanding of the ways in which people in Venda perceive and respond to HIV/AIDS. But the Venda material employed in this thesis presents us with one final problem in this regard. If, as has been established, knowledge is rooted in experience, are we then to assume that the ritual leaders at Dopeni, who slowly released the secrets of initiation, revealing the folk model of sexual illness to the initiates, have experienced sexual illness or the loss of fertility about which they purport to be experts? Put another way, are the ritual leaders polluted by their knowledge of pollution? After all, I have argued that peer educators, through their conspicuous knowledge of all things biomedical, are assumed to be well experienced in them. I suggested in Chapter 6 that connections between knowledge and experience can perhaps be mediated through recourse to

authority, power and influence, but, in retrospect, it would appear that there is more to this explanatory paradigm than I have alluded to. The answer to the question is no; the ritual experts are not assumed to be tainted by historical experience of the ritual corpus in this way, and the reason for this is to be found in the social context in which the transmission of knowledge is managed (see Fig. 7.1).

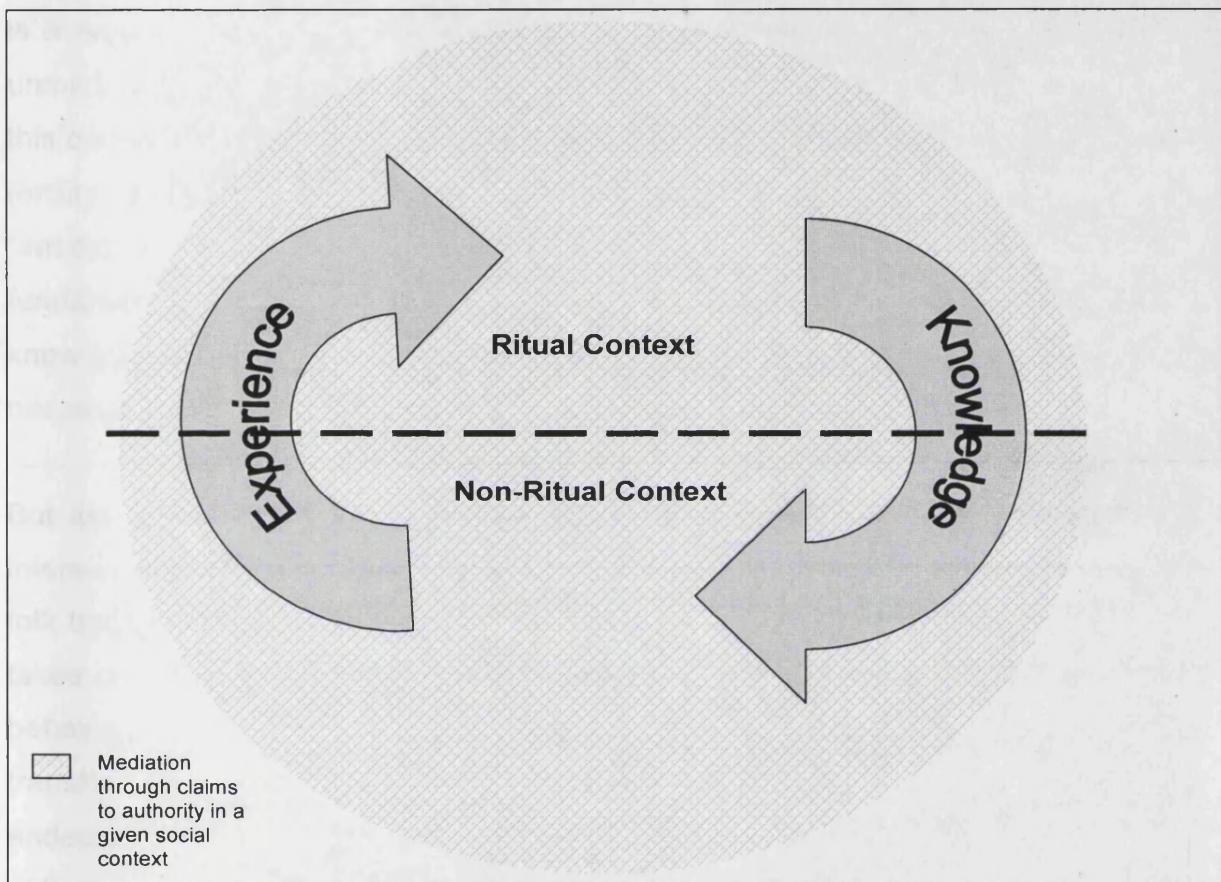


Fig. 7.1: The Knowledge/ Experience Paradigm

As Barth (1975, 2002) and Lambek (1993) have shown – and as my own data has evidenced – the ritual context in which a corpus of knowledge is transferred must be controlled strictly, and central to this control is the inculcation of secrecy. This is not primarily through a desire to construct and maintain privilege, hierarchy or the “mystification” of unequal power relations in society, although such socio-political dynamics may well arise from it.¹⁰¹ It is, rather, through a desire to protect a body of

¹⁰¹ Broadly Marxist arguments such as that proposed by Bloch (1992) are inadequate for a full comprehension of the dynamics that a ritual such as *Vhusha* gives rise to in the post-apartheid context. A crude Marxism that sees ritual as deceptive superstructural ideology dismisses culturally constructed worlds without understanding them. The challenge is to understand cultural meanings, but to step outside them as well – not simply to dismiss them as ideological mystifications, but to situate them in relation to historical

sacred knowledge that is fundamental to the maintenance of healthy social reproduction. Moreover, as Lambek and Barth argue forcefully, ritual knowledge is dangerous: in the wrong hands it can cause undesirable consequences for an individual and the wider community of which they are a part.

Therefore the secret and controlled transference of ritual knowledge, in the ritual context, is a well rehearsed safety measure designed to protect the experts and initiates from unmediated exposure to dangerous, but nonetheless essential, body of knowledge. In this context, the corpus of ritual knowledge in the *Vhusha* that refers to sexual health and fertility is explained to the initiates not as "sexual health" or "family planning", but as "ancestral wisdom" (*vhutali wa midzimu*) (cf. La Fontain 1985; Barth 1975). This is a fundamental and crucial obfuscation that provides a degree of separation between ritual knowledge and actual experience of it, but which facilitates the transfer of skills that are necessary for the reproduction of healthy sociality.

But the analysis of peer education has pointed to a different set of dynamics. At the intersection of planned HIV/AIDS interventions, where the line between biomedical and folk traditions of knowledge remains a blurred one, the knowledge/experience paradigm takes on a significantly different twist. If planned interventions are aimed at "changing behaviour" and providing education, then this is to be achieved primarily through the transferral of knowledge. As this thesis has demonstrated, this is hardly a straightforward endeavour, and such processes take place on what have been aptly termed "battlefields of knowledge" (Long 1992; cf. Cernea 1995).

On this "battlefield", the incorporation of medical science into the folk model has not entirely been a one way process. Through it, the biomedical model has come to be perceived by men and older women as a corpus of ritual knowledge. Given the educators' repeated claims that "their" knowledge, when applied to everyday behaviour, can prevent illness, treat infection and regulate fertility, the perception of science as ritual corpus, at least for those with a "working knowledge" of the folk model, is self evident.

processes, politics and economic relationships (Keesing and Strathern 1998: 320; cf. Blacking 1985). Nonetheless, authors such as Brenneis (1984) show that in rural Fiji, the pursuit of ritual knowledge in a relatively egalitarian society has a counterpart in the equal opportunity of all to share ritual knowledge that, in an acephalous context, is no longer the property of a particular, privileged group.

Biomedicine falls into Barth's "three faces" of ritual knowledge; a body of assertions and ideas (biomedicine), a media through which it is communicated (public performances), based upon and influencing a social organisation (the role of young women in allegedly non-governmental organisations). The "biomedical corpus", as it may be termed, and the folk model are both intended to facilitate social reproduction. Biomedicine also overlaps with the folk aetiology in its quest for efficacy; participation in the process of transference (the public performance) rests, at least in part, on the symbolic association with musical and dramatic representations of initiation.

Whilst the "man on the street", is expected to be knowledgeable about the folk model and interpret illness through it, s/he would not necessarily class themselves as "experts" in it – with the ability or sanction to facilitate its complete transference. Thus, whilst Solomon sings about the folk model, he does not see his position as warranting its teaching (cf. Lambek 1993: 69). Such a process occurs in the safe ritual environment of initiation; to recall Solomon's quote from Chapter 5: "These things are not even a secret. Venda boys are told all of this at *Murundu*." Through government funded workshops, peer educators have become the undisputed ritual experts of their "biomedical corpus", and through weekly public performances they seek to reveal and transfer it to the wider public, to create "men on the street", that may legitimate their corpus as the ritual experts at *Vhusha* do in transference of the folk model.

But the contrasting social context of knowledge transferral has profound consequences: whilst biomedicine is perceived as a ritual corpus, public performances are *not* recognised as ritualistic, but as profane, marginally successful entertainment. For this reason, peer educators can not be thought of as Turnerian "critics of crisis", involved in the implementation of ritual practice as redressive machinery for the resolution of a social drama (Turner 1957). By operating outside of a circumscribed, controlled, ritual environment, peer educators are deprived of the protection offered by secrecy or obfuscation: their corpus is not framed in the distancing terminology of "ancestral wisdom" but in the immediacy of "sexual health". In a non-ritual context, peer educators thus operate without the bulwark of a ritual hierarchy headed, ultimately, by the ancestors. Whilst this may have served to regulate their experiential connections with dangerous knowledge, their performances – attempts at knowledge transfer – at beer halls, clinics

and market-places leave them exceptionally vulnerable to guilt by association in the web of knowledge and experience.

In addition, then, to their counter-productive associations with biomedicine explained in Chapter 5, and their public courting of untold causes of death that were the topic of Chapter 6, the policy of peer education in Venda also forces young women to attempt the transferral of the "biomedical corpus" in exposed, non-ritual settings. If knowledge is rooted in experience, then this paradigm is mediated by two key variables: recourse to power/authority and the social context of knowledge transfer (see Fig 7.1). It is the combination of these factors – knowledge, experience, authority and context – that usurps the good intentions of policy makers in their design of participatory interventions for public health, and has essentially turned peer education programmes into powerful magnets for the attraction of social stigma. In the final analysis, the peer educators cannot "sing about what they can't talk about" without reinforcing the reasons why they could not talk in the first place. Music does not work, for them, as a means of transcending the knowledge/experience paradigm; but it does advertise their services as quasi-social workers, fluent in biomedicine and thus ultimately more employable than they would otherwise be.

If this thesis has demonstrated that young women are perhaps not the ideal candidates for AIDS education in Venda, then this points to a pertinent conflict with statistical representations – and epidemiological patterns – of the epidemic. From the policy maker's perspective, statistics show that young women are far more likely to become infected with HIV than any other demographic group in southern Africa.¹⁰² Thus the logic of implementing peer education projects within this category has largely been taken for granted. The unintended consequences that result from these projects – some of which I have alluded to – are not immediately visible and may remain obscure to the evaluation teams that sporadically assess project success in terms of categories such as "condoms distributed" and "public meetings held". Policy makers thus reinforced the folk model of sexual illness in which men are less concerned with *how* they sleep with women, and more concerned with *who* they sleep with. If peer educators endure their frequent

¹⁰² See http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Regions/SubSaharanAfrica.asp accessed on 6th February 2007.

association with the disease and are attributed with the blame for it, this is largely due to the potential for social mobility that their position gives them.

Like any study, this has not been without its limitations. This is an ethnography of AIDS with one glaring omission: the voice of those who are HIV positive. This is as much an issue for my analysis as it is a symptom of the social forces that I have been at pains to explain. With the absence of pressure groups such as the TAC in the Venda region, there is no secure framework within which people can be open about their status. Even among the peer educators, who promote the virtues of early testing for the benefits of treatment, there has not been *one* who has become public about her status. Of course, this is related to the widespread assumption that they are already carriers of the virus, and to their general intentions of leaving the projects, but their unwillingness to test and disclose their HIV status clearly cannot create an environment where others will follow suit.

A second limitation to the current work is that it provides an analysis of prevention projects when the tide is turning fast towards interventions for the treatment of people living with AIDS. Among those who become sick and are brave enough to take the HIV antibody test, disclosure is a prerequisite for the prescription of ARV medication. In the context of the arguments made in this thesis, the forced disclosure of HIV status may have far reaching implications for the extent to which patients decide to embark on a commitment to the medication. Early signs in Venda were that some patients would rather go without the medication, and those who did disclose were more likely to do so in a support group to other HIV positive people than to tell a family member. Not enough people have been taking ARVs in the region for long enough to establish any patterns, but we should not be surprised when statistics report the uptake of ARVs as minimal, and we should not be satisfied with explanations for this that stop at inadequate infrastructure.

Meanwhile, peer education continues to be one of the most prevalent forms of AIDS education in the world (Campbell 2003). I hope that, in some way, the data and analysis presented in this thesis can contribute to more nuanced policy, or at least provide models for understanding, however partial, the resounding failure of current approaches.

APPENDIX A

Track Listings on attached CD

1. *Tshikona* – Recorded at *Vhuhosi Ngwenan ya Themeli* in July 2005.
2. *Domba* – Recorded at *Tsianda* in May 2005.
3. *Vhusha* – *Nya Vhasadza* – Recorded at *Tsianda* March 2005.
4. *Vho I vhonna naa?* – Ha-Matsa, peer educators.
5. *Daraga* – *Tshikombani* peer educators.
6. *Hey, Wena Gatsha* – Radio Freedom CD.
7. *Ndi a Tuwa* – *Tshigwada Tsha* Toronto.
8. *Ntate Modise* – *Amaqabane*.
9. *Condomu Ndi Bosso* – Ha Matsa peer educators.
10. *AIDSE* – *Tshakhuma* peer educators.
11. *ZwoNaka* (Commonly Occurring Version)
12. *Zwonaka* (Peer Education Version) Ha-Matsa.
13. *Consomiza haa!* Ha Matsa peer educators.
14. *Jojo Tshilangano* – *Tshakhuma* peer educators.
15. *Ri do I fhenya* – Ha-Matsa peer educators.
16. *Muimana* – *Tshilombani* peer educators.
17. *Jealous Down* – *Tshikombani* peer educators.
18. *Zwidzumbe* – Solomon, Ngulumbi 26-06-2005.

Please note: The software used to burn the CD is intended to produce CDs for use on PCs or laptop computers. The CD may therefore be unreliable on a conventional stereo. For skipping tracks, and fast-forwarding within a track, please listen to the CD on a computer.

APPENDIX B

'ZWIDZUMBE' (SECRETS)

Written and performed by Solomon Mathase

(Track 17 on CD).

[Opens with him taking the persona of a nurse at a clinic]

(1) *Huna mashango thano Venda o Vhaliwa* (x4)

There are many villages here in Venda, and they are all counted

(2) *Khavhaye sibadela vha dodi vhavhudza vhone* (x2)

Go to the hospital, they will tell you so

(3) *Hana mashango o vhaliwa hafha clinici*

There are villages, counted here at the clinic

(4) *Vhari tshone ndi tshidzumbe na tshone ndi tsha vhone vhane wee!*

They say it is a secret, just for them (those who are sick)

(5) *Hetshi ndi tshidzumbe ndi tsha vhone vhane wee!*

(they claim that) this is *their* secret

(6) *Thinga ambi mungana nga uri na nne ndo do shuma wee!*

I will not talk/gossip, my friend, I am just here to work

[Now talking as himself – as *Tshilombe*]

(7) *Khavha do pfa muthu a tshi khou toda u vhula lisa munwe muthu*

Listen now, someone is leading another into troubles

(8) *Ndi Khou pfana na mungana, ha nyagi u zwi amba*

I have a female friend, but she also does not want to talk (about it)

(9) *Vho nnese nazwino a vhanyagi u zwi amba*

The nurses, even now, they don't want to talk

(10) *Vho dokotela, nazwino, a vhanyagi u zwi amba*

The doctors (biomedical), even now, they don't want to talk

(11) *Ndi Khou nyaga u amba nga AIDS*

Now I want to talk about AIDS

(12) *A vhanyagi u zwi amba*

(Even although) they do not want to tell

[Now talking as a woman]

(13) *Vhasadzi rifela masheleni lupfuno wee!*

Women, we love money too much

(14) *Kha ri fe, ri fhelele nga uri tshelede ri khou itoda*

Lets all die, because we want money

[Woman speaking to woman]

(15) *Tshelede ndi khou itoda mungana, sa kanudi yela hafho*

I want money, my friend, just go there yourself (to get it – to sell sex)

(16) *Nne tshelede ndi khou toda soku ndi...*

I want money, let me just...

(17) *Hei, AIDS, ndi kwine ndi do fa nayo wee! [2mins. 22 secs]*

This AIDS, it is better that I just die with it

(18) *Ngauri ndi khou toda tshelede heee!*

Because I want money!

[Woman speaking to long term boyfriend who she lives with]

(19) *Ndi do u ita na nfanedza, nga uri fhano mudini a hu liwi na tshithu, a hu liwi na tshithu mungana. Ndi musi ndi mathungo ashu ro no kwatisana ngauri ndi vhudziwa zwa uri nne athishumi mungana*

I will just take it (have sex outside the relationship), because in this house we have nothing to eat, nothing to eat my friend. It is because of that business of ours, after we quarrelled – making each other angry – and I am always being told by you that I do not work.

[Speaking as himself again] top p3

(20) *Vhashavha na u isa zwilonda*

They run away and leave open sores (ulcers or a shallow festering spot associated with sexually transmitted diseases – possibly lesions associated with HIV)

(21) *Vhashavha na ula malwadze*

They run away those illnesses (sexually transmitted)

(22) *Vhashavha na zwila zwithu zwe vhari, vha sokona a zwina ndavha*

They run away with those things they say are just useless

(23) *Na nne, ndi fa lithihi, lushaka lukhou fhela*

And me, I will die (only) once, the nation is vanishing (litt. getting finished)

(24) *A rizwifuni mungana a ridivhani matshelo rokuvhangana!*

We do not like it my friend, and we will not like it tomorrow when we are gathered (i.e. at your house for your funeral)

(25) *Zwipfisa mbilu vhutungu mungana naguri na inwi no tuwa, a hee*

It is very painful in my heart, my friend, because you are now also gone

(26) 'Ndo dzhia tshelede, ngau nga vhusiwana' (x2)

(singing as the dead woman) 'I took the money, because of poverty'.

[Now referring to a rich man with many 'girlfriends']

(27) *Mulovha ni tshi di khoda niri a ni fhedziwi*

Yesterday, you boasted that you can never get finished (of money)

(28) *Na dzhena lonzhi, ndi inwi, ndi inwi*

And entering the lounge, it is you, it is you (who buys all the beer)

(29) *Na dzhena hodelani, ndi inwi ndi inwi* [4 mins. 4secs.]

And entering the hotel, it is you, it is you

(30) *Na dzhena dzithekhisini, ndi inwi, ndi inwi*

And getting into taxis, it is you, It is you

(31) *Navhuya na fhata na nndu, ndi inwi, ndi inwi*

You came back (from migrant labour) to build a house, it is you, it is you

(32) *He ila nndu yanu ina opositizi!*

And this house of yours, it even has upstairs!

(33) *No vhuya no renga goloi na yone ndi Pajura*

You even bought a car, it was a Pajero

(34) *Vhafhasi navhone a ni tsha vha funana*

The ancestors, you no longer love them

(35) *Vhanntha, ni nyaga 'vho ne...'*

You prey to the Christian God, high up in the Sky

(36) *Aidzi ritshimbila, ritshimbilanayo, ri tshimbilanayo* (x3)

AIDS, we walk, we walk with it, we walk with it.

(37) *Ahee, ritshimbilanayo, Nne, Aidzi, Vhari Vha tou I rengisa, vhari vhatou rengisa vhone vhane.*

We walk with it, Me, AIDS, they say they sell it because you buy it.

(38) *A thi fi, nne ndi ndothe (x2)*

I will not die alone. (This is the name of a Radio Thohoyandou Drama ('ndi do fa na vchange' – I will die with many) from between 1986/88 – the first time AIDS was dramatised in radio drama. The story line was of a temptress young girl called Munaka (beauty) who discovered she was HIV positive from selling sex in beer halls, and endeavoured to sleep with as many men as possible to pass on the virus before she died.

(39) *Aidzi, vhatau rengisa*

AIDS, many people are selling it

(40) *i tou rengiwa wee! Sa mukipukipu*

And they buy it! Just like popcorn

(41) *i tou rengiwa wee! Sa masimba, kha la Venda Kha la Venda wee! [5 mins. 45]*

And they buy it, like crisps here in Venda, here in Venda

(42) *Madocotela, itani! Vhe lushaka lu khou thela*

(Biomedical) doctors, just do it (make medicine) – the nation is getting finished

(43) *Ndi tou livhuwa Mudzimu, munwe ari*

I thank God, someone said,

(44) *Kha la Venda ndi tou tshimbila na ma-shango*

Here in Venda, I will walk around the villages

(45) *Vhatshimbila na mivhundu vha dzhena Mahosini*

They walked around the villages, even entered the Kings court

(46) *Vha do zwiwana ngauri thuso a l ho*

They will just find out that there is no help (for them) there

(47) *Vhono di lenga*, - (in English) - "you are late, you are late my friend. Come here! It is much better can you help you maybe.. get ready 15 days or 20 days or 100 days. Can I help you? *Ndo vha thusa?*

(48) *Nga Lwa hashu zwiya kondo wee (x2)*

In our language, it is difficult. (He is trying to get it into English – Solomon can speak very basic English, and he had asked me to teach him more.)

[Now he is speaking as a inyanga – Solomon is a practicing inyanga]

(49) *Ndi do dzhia zwidongo na lugwane ndi tshiyo tala miri thavhani*

I will take broken pieces of pot (zwidongo - container for storing mixtures of medicinal herbs – also used as a ritual object in Vhusha, Domba and Murundu) and a shovel when I go looking for herbs in the mountain

(50) *Hezwi ndo dzula ndo rali thina na goloi ndi yodzhia ila mushonga mashangoni*

As I sit here, I don't even have a car to drive there and get that medicine from far away parts of the country

(51) *Ha Makuya ndi kule (x3) [7 mis. 21 secs.]*

Ha Makuya is far (a region of Venda in the remote north eastern corner, associated with powerful traditional medicines. It borders with the Kruger National Park and Zimbabwe).

(52) *Khavha mmbeuele*

Just look for me/help me to look for it

(53) *Vhone, U khou lovha*

He is dying

(54) *Muzwala, u khou fa, khonani khonani na lushaka shangoni*

Cousin, he is dying, my friend, and the nation (listen to me)

(55) *Ri tshimbilanayo* (x4)

We walk with it

(56) *Hetshi tshigero*

These scissors (i.e. it is cutting people down)

(57) *Vhakegulu vhari ndi yone* 'Ace', a *vhatshari Aidzi*, *vhari* 'Ace'

Old women, they say it is 'Ace' (the mealie meal flour) they don't say 'AIDS' i.e they can not pronounce it

(58) *Ende u tshivhudzisa vhari houla o liwangan?*

And when you ask them what killed him?

(59) *Vhari* 'Ace'

They say 'Ace'

(60) *Vhotau ko' vhana vhutuku vha khou fhela*

[Shortened version of the proverb – *vho tou konyolela matanda ndevheni* – they break sticks into small pieces and put them in their ears – i.e. the youth no longer hear the words of wisdom from their elders – the young kids are 'getting finished' - perishing.

(61) *Vhana vhutuku nga mirole*

These kids are young in years

(62) *Vhana vhutuku, vhakegulu vha vkou gungula na vhakalaha*

The young kids are making the old women and old men grumble/worry/complain

(63) *Vhotou u gungula vhari ri vhulungwa nga nnyi muduhulu – ni khou lovha!*

They complain and ask their grandchildren 'who will you be buried by?' as you are dying.

[Now speaking as young people in response to the elders]

(64) *vhari ri khou lovha ri do vhulungwa nga nnyi?* (x3)

They say we are dying, and ask who will bury us

[Speaking again as parents/grandparents, engaged in gossip about the cause of a recent death] **[8mins 50 seconds]**

(65) *houla mudulu nda ndi sa mufuni zwone, na u la nwanawanga, nda ndi sa mufuni zwone*

that grandson – I really loved him. And that child of mine, I really loved him/her

(66) *u pfī o vhulwa nga yenei Aids*

they say he/she was killed by this AIDS

(67) *vhone, vho pfa uri zone ndi zwifhip?*

You, what did you hear?

(68) *U la munwe ari hupfī hai! O tou wela*

That other one, he said no! he slept with a woman who aborted a child (o tou wela – the phrase for an abortion that was not properly cleaned/purified out by specific herbs.)

(69) *Munwe ari hai! Thiri o vha a khou pfana na u la musadzi wa vho-mukene?*

The other one said no! isn't it that he was in love with that woman of Mr so and so?

(70) *Nwana wa vho-mugede vhone vha..*

The child of mr so and so...

(71) *Muthemba, ula – ari thiri u tou nga o vha o bvisa thumbu?*

Do you really trust her? That one says isn't it that she had an abortion? (Folk model – if a man sleeps with a woman who has had an abortion but was not properly 'sterilized' with the correct herbs afterwards, then the man will contract potentially fatal illness. It is believed that an *inyanga* can kill the foetus easily, but it takes a lot more effort to cleanse the womb after this has occurred and return the woman to the proper 'cleansing' menstrual cycle.

(72) *Munwe ari hai! Thiri o vha a na zwilondo nga nnyoni?*

Another one said no! isn't it that she had sores in/on her vagina? (*zwilondo* – see above)

(73) *Munwe ari hai! O vha otou vhifha muvhilini*

Another said no! she was pregnant (litt. was ugly in the body)

[Turning to speak as himself (inyanga) now – moving away from the gossip above]

(74) *Ngoho mara zwone zwa vhukuma ndi zwifhipo?*

Really, but honestly, which one of these is really the truth here?

(75) *Tshihulwane, o vhuya a dida na kha nne ari ndi mufhe mushonga*

They even visited me in a very respectful manner so that I could give them *mushonga*

(76) *A tshiyo pfana na nwana wa vho –*

When she went to fall in love with the child of Mr. so and so

(77) *Mukene thumbu a yongo fara*

But she could not conceive a child

(78) *Mulandu ndi zwilonda zwe zwi la zwa nwe ndi li a 'gokhonya'*

The problem was the sores (*zwilonda*) which led to 'gokhonya' (an STD only found in women after a difficult or problematic birth eg- caesarean. Symptoms include the child refusing the mother's milk and red marks on the child's head and neck. White pimples will be found inside the vagina, and the conventional cure involves the inyanga scraping the vaginal sores with a razor and mixing the resultant fluid with the mother's urine and a mixture of three herbs. This is then given to the child in a milky drink and it will be healed. The mother, however, must undergo several more rites of purification.)

(79) *A vhongo vhona na ula nwanawawe wa u thoma, o mbo di lovha*

Didn't you see her first child? It died.

(80) *O vha o funa o ya hangeni ha 'vho nyatshavhungwa'. Thiri na vhala vha a zwikonda?*

She should have consulted Mrs Nyatshavhungwa (a maine – a family doctor. Families have allegiance to certain maine, not the same as inyanga – that is responsible for overall spiritual protection and uses thangu (divining bones). Maines specify in specific areas – and those by the name of Nyatshavhungwa are children's doctors). Isn't it that she can deal with those difficult things?

(81) *Na vhala vho Jimu, fhedzi nne nda mulaya*

And (she should even have visited) Mr. Jim (another local Maine), but at this time it was me who advised her

(82) *O fhedza, hanefho nne nda vhosokou pfa ndi 'dabadaba'*

After all that, I just ended up like a lunatic (dabadaba) (i.e. my advise was for nothing, she was just wasting my time)

(83) *Mathikho! hou la nwana ndi dababada*

Ooh! That young girl became a lunatic

(84) *A mbodi enda a vha a tshi khou dze dza hangeni, onoya lonzhi*

She started to spend nights at the beer halls

(85) *Nne nda tou mugida, nda tou mufha na munwe mushonga*

I advised her, and gave her the correct mushonga

(86) *Nda mbodi dahia na tshila tshinopfi tshirole*

I even gave her tshirole (a specific medicine to assist in her social and physical development)

(87) *Nda mbodi mugwela nda muthusa*

I even dug up muti (from tree roots) that helped her

(88) *mathiko! hezwi a khou tavha mukosi ho onovha hange 'bodelotshitolo na lonzhi'*

vhone vhatou zuza fhedzi nda ndi songo mutela zwothe

Hee! When she makes noise like that (i.e. started to regain health), she was happy in the beer hall, but this medication was just my first step for her to follow – I did not give her the entire sequence/dosage.

(89)*na zwino mushonga wahone kheyu zwino nne ndi khou mangala hu tshipfi hai na zwino vhula vhulwadze hokunda nga usapfa!*

Now, I still have that medicine I was going to give her, and it was amazing to hear when they say that illness is beyond healing (i.e. she is dead), and all because she *did not listen to me!*

(90)*Arali o vha o ita hezwi ro vha ri tshi do divha ro muthusa fhedzi ha rido itahani?*

If she had followed this (advice), we could have saved her, but what can we do? N.b. similarities with failure to follow a course of ARV medication.

(91)*Zwino hupfi mbulungo ndi ya vhege Idaho*

Now they say that the funeral is next week

(92)*Ee, Yaa! Zwa zwisongo fanelia*

It was not expected

(93)*Hee! ndi zwe zwi la zwilondo*

It is because of these sores (zwilondo)

(94)*Ngoho havha vhava vhaano maduvha vhado fhela*

Really, today's' children, they will perish.

[Solomon's Friend now talking to him]

(95)*Vha do fhela ngani mungana?*

What will they perish by, my friend?

[Solomon's response]

(96) *Ndari huna vhulwadze ha zwilonda hafha nnyoni dza vhasidzana ende vhathannga a vhavhuyi vha zwithogomela*

Like I said, there is illness of sores (*zwilonda*) in girls' vaginas, and young men do not take care

(97) *Ndikhouri vha songo vhuya vha zwi ambanı*

Even you, my friend, please don't ever speak about it

[Friend responding]

(98) *Aa mara vhone vhala ndi khonani yangavho*

But that man is your friend, (i.e. how can you keep quiet)

[Solomon]

(99) *arali wa tou vhasevhelavho hu si uri na munwe a dovhe vho*

maybe if you just tip him off when no one else is around, that will be fine

(100) *ai ndi a vhuya nda tou ralo ndido vhudza makhadzi wanu uri zwithu zwitshile?*

Ah! Will I have to report this to your auntie (that you are not listening) so that you will not die?

(101) *Hafha shangoni a vhanga koni u tshila*

Here, in this world, you can not live

(102) *Unwana ri thetshelesa milayo, ri thetshelesa milayo* (x3)

If you are a child, you must listen to the rule/laws

(103) *Midi yofhambana na malofha o fhambana, na shango lo fhambana*

Houses are different, and blood (i.e. family) is different, and villages are different

(104) *Ndi ngani hutshikhou pfi 'vhala mukalaha vhoshulwa mutodo?'*

Why is it that they say the old man was smeared with fresh cow dung? (Metaphoric comparison of old age with the smearing of dung on floors and walls to make them strong and fit for human habitation)

(105) *Ndingani hukhou pfi 'fhala mudini a huna lufu?*

Why is it they are saying that 'in that household, there is no death?'

(106) *Vhavenda vhatshiamba vhari o dzhia shambo la hone*

Vendas, when they speak, they say yes, he has inherited the correct (pure) blood (skeleton) of the family (i.e. the child must bear resemblance to the father). (making reference to socially acceptable ways of reproduction – not from casual sexual encounters with dangerous women, but within controlled, planned liaisons between different homesteads).

(107) *A vho vholi nga ngei, hu tshi pfi huna ha-Tshivhase*

Don't you see, there, he is a Tshivhase

(108) *hadovha nga ngeno hapfi hu na ha ngei ha Mathase*

and here, over here, this one is of Ha-Mathase (showing the differences between the two families)

(109) *Ha dovha hapfi hu na vhala vhanwe nga ngei vho*

And again, they say, there are also many other families (that are different)

(110) *U amba nga madzena ndi sokou lopola*

But, to talk about all these names is just a waste of time (litt. talking shit)

(111) *Fhedzi ngoho yone vha a idivha!*

And after all, you know the truth!

(112) *Nne ndi khouri amba ndi khouri English, Afrikaans, Tshizulu, Tshisuthu, Tshikhosa, Tshibeli, hotho hothe nne ndi ya vha dzenela*

I am saying that it can either be English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Sipedi, everywhere – I will verbally attack the youngsters who do not want to listen.

(113) *Hee, Hedzi nyambo dzithe dici tshi tuwa dzituwa dici tshikhous tou ya 'sitireiti', 'tswii'!*

All these languages, when they go (are spoken), they should go straight, direct to the point! (making point that it is not just Venda youth who are dying – youth through out South Africa no longer respect their elders values)

(114) *Ngauri arali ndi khouri 'how are you', yo tou da sitirethi kha vhone*

Because if I am saying 'how are you' – then it is straight forward

(115) *Ari ndi khouri 'minjani' yo tou da kha vhone sitirethi, tswii!*

And if I say 'hello', then it is too the point!

(116) *Arali nne ndi khouri 'hu itahani' ndi khouri na vhone zwotou da khavhone tswi!*

And if I am saying 'how are you' it is coming at you straing to the point!

(117) *Nga uri tshivhenda na tshikalanga, tshizulu a tshidologowi, u nga tou zwita lukanya!*

Because in Venda, Shona, Zulu, there is no need for translation, they can be easily understood!

(118) *Vha do lovha mungana, nga u sapfa, mungana, khonani nga u safpa*

They will die, my friend, because they are not listening

(119) *A huna ane a nga takadza shango lothe*

No one can ever please the whole world

(120) *Kani ha ndi zwone zwe itaho uri vhafunzi vha zwifhe mavhidani*

Maybe this is what causes the pastors to tell lies at the graveside (i.e. covering up the cause of death)

(121) *Hafha shangoni lothe a huna mufunzi ane anga vha kuae*

In the entire world no pastor can be perfect

(122) *Vhasukou tou pumokana, arali ha vhafunzi vhovha vhakhou da na zwavhukuma na rine ra do amba zwa vhukuma*

They just blame each other, pointing fingers, if the pastors were bringing the truth we would also be able to talk the truth

(123) *Ndi ngazwo mbilu yanga iya vhavha*

This is why my heart is so painful

(124) *Ndo muvhulaya!*

I killed him! (quote from contemporary reggae song commenting on the recent increase in witchcraft related killings in Limpopo – used here as a metaphor for death – actual and potential – being all around – and also as a quote from the woman in the radio drama (line 38)

Appendix C

AIDS, AIDS, AIDS.

By Edward Maphanda

Aids, Aids, Aids, mysterious woe, bury the old and new alike,
The world trembles as no cure is found,
The stubborn child of the white man who ignores other cultures,
Though sex will be forever and forever sweet.

Aids, Aids, Aids, one white mans threat, not known for long in other cultures,
Only reigns in white mans laboratories,
And being defeated, they give it a gigantic name,
to confront the black healer, now and again.

Muti, muti, muti, no not AIDS,
Muti, muti from healers of years upstream,
And still to go millions downstream,
Where AIDS was not called AIDS, the healer has his own words for the disease.

10 days the healer needs to cure your AIDS,
3 bowel movements needed to cut of virus,
Virus seen in second and third movements,
One liter of tonic herbs and sex is forever and ever sweet.

AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, revenge of the unborn,
The white man is unaware you are the remains of the Fetus,
Yes, AIDS is the poison from the aborted child,
Our ancestors have identified the muti, the signs and the symptoms.

Black nurses and doctors have become sellouts,
the custom they buried for a foreign culture,
when ours originated with the creator,
Who is in all science and all life

He did hide the healing power in herbs,
and Christianity failed to align faith and creation,
the vagina is related to Rwanda and Kosovo.
the pussy being known for pleasure, instead of progeny.

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