BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

CHILDREN AND CHILDHOODS
IN HEALTH AND AFFLICTION

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CHAPTER 7

MANAGING VULNERABILITY AND CHANGE THROUGH AMAKHOSI SPIRIT POSSESSION

Stephen Pentz

The social contexts and interactions that anthropologist witness are, more often than not, incommensurate, paradoxical, and difficult to describe. They reveal an entangled web of relations and experiences that encompass multiple temporalities; it is this sense of entanglement that gestures towards “a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness” (Nuttall, 2009:1). What is encompassed within this “folded-together-ness of being” (Sanders, 2002:11), are the multiple temporalities with which we experience the everyday. This notion of entanglement not only “enables a complex temporality of past, present and future” (Nuttall, 2009:11) but also offers, in the South African context, “a rubric in terms of which we can begin to meet the challenge of the ‘after apartheid’” (Ibid.), as it allows one to find the points of intersection between seemingly disparate phenomena, paradigms, and discourses.

The chapter evokes the notion of entanglement, ontologically, in two ways: firstly, it challenges the ways in which African traditional medicine and healing is often constructed in opposition to dominant discourses of biomedicine, which depict all things deemed “traditional” within an “allochronic discourse” (Fabian, 1983:143); existing outside of time, coming from an indefinite past, as timeless and unchanging. Practices that are seen as ‘traditional’ or ‘cultural’ are never static, but fluid and adaptable. More especially, “traditional” African forms of healing are often entangled within multiple temporalities in that they deal with problems

that exist between the living and the dead, bridging the imagined divide between tradition and modernity. As White (2001) demonstrates, the forces of conjecture and disjuncture, collusion and rupture that inscribe the relation of tradition to modernity are complex and variable. His exploration into one rural family's present day experiences of hardship and misfortune reveals how past injustices that were never righted continue to plague the living, particularly in light of the challenges that post-apartheid South Africa's political economy poses to projects of domestic reproduction. In this way, traditional African forms of healing offer an epistemological challenge to the notion of linear temporality. Secondly, the notion of entanglement is useful in thinking through the ways in which young people make sense of traditional African forms of healing, ritual and medicine within a multi-axial context of social, structural and spiritual vulnerabilities.

This chapter recounts the varied experiences of a group of young people living in and around the small university town of Makhanda, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. It explores the creative agency employed by young people in the ways through which they make sense of, and challenge, their circumstances through the use of *amakhosi* spirit possession. At the time, I was working with young people who were part of a youth programme called *Siyapumelela* – “we are succeeding” – linked to a Voluntary Counselling and HIV Testing (VCT) centre, the Raphael Centre. The centre was founded in 1999 to assist people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS and has always maintained a strong commitment to impoverished communities in and around Makhanda. As the centre's vision and mission make clear, the Raphael Centre seeks to work “with communities, building physical, mental and social health and inspiring hope” and seeks to encourage people “to create healthy and caring communities” (The Raphael Centre). The youth programme, *Siyapumelela*, was set up to offer a space for young people between the ages of 13 and 21 from the surrounding area to come together, not only to work through their respective experiences of HIV/AIDS in a safe and understanding environment, but to share in the experience of ‘being young’. At the time of the research, there were about 60 members enrolled in the programme; most participants were isiXhosa speakers from Makhanda's Joza township, and a handful were Afrikaans speakers from Makhanda's former ‘coloured’ area.

The concept of continuous traumatic stress is useful in describing how some of the young people interpreted their experiences of social, structural and spiritual vulnerability.¹ The discussion that follows maps onto four key characteristics of continuous traumatic stress, as identified by Eagle and Kaminer (2013:89); firstly, the context of the stressor conditions; secondly, the temporal location of the stressor conditions; thirdly, the complexity of discriminating between real and perceived or imagined threat; and finally the absence of external protective systems. With regards to contextualising stressor conditions, the research traces different forms of social structural violence that young people are regularly exposed to, and looks at the impact of the failure and dissolution of core institutions in young people's lives – most notably schools and family units. The discussion reviews the prickliness of the dichotomous positioning of 'tradition versus modernity' in unpacking the intersection of multiple temporalities present in young peoples lives. Young people express a sense of spiritual insecurity as a result of the disruption in maintaining the ancestral cult – this in turn leads to a concern that the manifest anger of their ancestors will impact their present and future opportunities. The loss and uncertainty of protective mechanism, both structural and spiritual, has led to an increased popularity in *amakhosi* spirit possession and *amakhosi* gangs. Young men who are initiated into *amakhosi* gangs challenge dominant conceptions of masculinity as they have typically not been through *ulwaluko* – the customary rite of passage from boyhood to manhood (Ntombana, 2011) – yet they engage in activities reserved for men; such as drinking and sexual activities. As such, *amakhosi* spirit possession acts as a means of re-establishing balance and order in dislocated social environments, while at the same time challenging and reframing notions of masculinity. The sense of liminality is particularly salient for many young men who feel caught between adolescents and adulthood as they wait to undertake the rite of *ulwaluko*. The culturally sanctioned transformation into a man requires the social and economic support of kith and kin, which can often lead to delays in achieving 'adult' status.

1 This is not to suggest that the participants I worked with necessarily exhibited symptoms of on-going trauma, but rather to draw parallels between the conditions that perpetuate CTS and the conditions that many young people from structurally violent communities are subject to.

Contextual and temporal stressor conditions in young people's lives as a product of social structural violence

Eagle and Kaminer (2013:89) explain that the idea of *continuous* traumatic stress is tied to the recognition that, for many people, "trauma exposure is both current and to be realistically anticipated in the future, rather than being past or post". The contexts that produce a sense of continuous traumatic stress often occur in spaces in which "danger and threat are largely faceless and unpredictable, yet pervasive and substantive" (Ibid). Young people face many day-to-day challenges as a product of the structurally violent environments in which they live. Yet because social structural violence contributes variously to human suffering, subjective experiences of suffering are often difficult to measure and describe. Paul Farmer (1996:274 original emphasis) suggests that in trying to understand how social structural violence impacts individual experiences of suffering, it is important to keep to both a *geographically* and *historically* broad analysis. Farmer further suggests that any analysis of social structural violence should take into account the multiple axes of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, as these factors variously influence the ways in which human suffering is contextually experienced. A multi-axial model of analysis that simultaneously draws together these social axes is "imperative in efforts to discern a political economy of brutality" (Farmer, 1996:274), that invariably impacts individual experiences of vulnerability. In contemporary South Africa, within the context of everyday experiences of social structural violence, the historical remnants of colonialism, apartheid and racialised capitalism continue to shape the objective realities and subjective experiences of everyday social life (Robins, 2008).

It is important to bear in mind that, for the most part, post-apartheid South Africa has experienced "liberation under neoliberal conditions" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999:229). Although poverty alleviation has been a constant project of the post-apartheid government, millions of disenfranchised people continue to live in dire conditions of poverty. In this light, a constant battle is fought for access to basic social services, such as adequate sanitation and health-care, access to electricity and running water and improved educational facilities. Structurally violent environments are marked by an underdeveloped economic infrastructure and a lack of access to resources. The vestiges of apartheid social engineering are structurally evident in today's townships, and widespread poverty

is a constant reality for those who are subject to such conditions. Alongside the socio-economic conditions typical to structurally violent environments, the axes of race and gender affect the way social suffering is individually experienced and (re)produced. Historically, black South African men were removed from rural economies and inserted into a capitalist system as migrant labourers. As a result, the 'traditional' African family unit became highly fragmented. Bozzoli (1987) argues that the rupture of the African family unit helped reproduce pre-colonial forms of gender inequality. As a result, in post-apartheid South Africa, despite a constitution supportive of racial, gender and sexual equality, there are still "deeply embedded ideas and practices that reproduce gender and sexual inequality" (Robins, 2008:145).

Apartheid social engineering not only ensured the dissolution of the traditional African domestic unit, a feature that has continued through to the present, although for a number of different reasons (see Hunter, 2006), but also coerced men into migrating to urban areas in search of work. As such, traditional structures of patriarchy were intentionally destabilised, leading to a "weakening of kinship-based support mechanisms" (Fiereman & Janzen, 1992:8), which in turn reduced the possibility of organised resistance against the colonial and apartheid state. Unto the present, as a result of migrant labour and forced removals, men continue to be "disempowered, unemployed, and uprooted – especially in relation to their families and their children" (Ramphela & Richter, 2006:73). The disruption that was caused due to the re-organisation of the domestic unit, both as a result of apartheid social engineering and the demands of modernity, has had long lasting implications for the construction of masculine identities and the maintenance of cultural institutions. This is highlighted in the story I recount below:

We have come to the end of the workshop and the *Siyapumelela* coordinator – Auntie N – is making her routine announcements for the day. Auntie N has been planning an exciting end of year tour to Cape Town. For many of the participants, this will not only be their first visit to the Western Cape but the first time they'll be leaving Makhanda. The trip is being partly sponsored by the Makana Municipality and the participants have been invited by the Mayor of Makhanda to attend a lunch where the money will be handed over.

Auntie N asks in a loud voice if everyone still has their *Siyapumelela* t-shirts from the previous year. Her question rebounds off the walls in the echoing hall. So too does the almost unanimous 'yes'.

“No, Auntie N. No, I don’t have a t-shirt anymore”, shouts Thabo, trying to get her attention.

“Why not?”, asks Auntie N. “What did you do with it?” “I had to burn it”, replies Thabo matter-of-factly

“Me too”, adds Sandile quickly.

This strange statement seems to need no explanation for the rest of the teenagers in the room, but Auntie N isn’t so easily placated.

“Why did you burn it?” she asks shortly.

“We had to burn our clothes from when we were children before we went to the bush”, Thabo explains. “Now that we are men, we can’t wear children’s clothes”.

This seems to bring the issue to an abrupt close. Auntie N accedes to this statement and makes a note to get more t-shirts.

This story, recounted from field notes, reveals the ways in which young people engage with and seek to maintain traditional cultural practices; in this case the ritual of *ulwaluko* – the Xhosa customary rite of passage from boyhood to manhood (Ntombana, 2011), usually undertaken by boys aged 18 years and older. As is clear from the above situation, many young people in South Africa have to juggle ‘traditional’ practices and the demands of modernity in ways that are sometimes paradoxical or incommensurate. The symbolic act of ritual renewal and reconstitution in the burning of one’s childhood clothes, for example, marks a challenge to the logics of modernity. As Ngwane (2004:180) explains, Xhosa initiation rites allow for the “birthing of social subjects”, in the social reproduction of masculine identities. And as Mfecane (2016) has shown, in his challenge to western theories of masculinity, which place heterosexual men at the top of a masculine hierarchy, the most ‘honoured’ form of masculine identity is ascribed to *indoda* – a man that has undergone *ulwaluko* and been traditionally circumcised, regardless of his sexual preference. To claim ‘*Ndiyindoda*’ – “I am a man”, is to make public one’s social standing above ‘subordinate’ forms of masculinity, such as *amakwenwke* (boys) or medically circumcised men that have not undergone *ulwaluko*.

Initiation rituals into manhood are often a “particularly spectacular display of the economic implications of producing new male subjects” (Ngwane, 2004:185), given families’ obligations in the face of economic constraints (see Mhlahlo, 2009); the

cost of the circumcision surgery,² the costs of living during the seclusion period, refurbishing young men with new clothes and bedding, and the lavish public displays of 'spilling' the household's wealth once boys return from 'the bush' as men, to mention but a few. The huge economic and social investment placed on young men in these ways may be a difficult burden to bear. *Ulwaluko* acts to inscribe socially legitimated sexualised subjects, as any Xhosa initiate that has completed the ritual is reintegrated into the community, officially regarded as a man (*indoda*), which allows him to marry, build a homestead and actively participate in community discussions and rituals (Ntombana, 2011). Uncircumcised Xhosa speaking males, on the other hand, remain boys (*amakhwenkwe*), irrespective of their age or social status (Mfecane, 2016). As such, they are not allowed to marry or perform rituals. Medically circumcised men are equally viewed as being inferior to traditionally circumcised men and given negative labels (Peltzer & Kanta, 2009; Mavundla et al., 2010). It is possible to see, therefore, the social significance ascribed to the ritual of *ulwaluko* in forming young people's sense of self.

In order to explore the ways in which young people engaged with cultural practices (such as the ritual of *ulwaluko*) and the ways in which traditional forms of healing enter into their lives, I chose to use a particular methodology based on Tobias Hecht's (1998) work with children in Northeast Brazil. Hecht gave tape recorders to street children to play around with and invent radio workshops. The children interviewed each other, imitating voices they had heard on the radio, and asked questions that Hecht would either have had difficulty asking, or would simply not have thought of. What Hecht (1998:9) noted was that when the children were given the opportunity to record their voices, they "tended to view the tape recorder not with suspicion but as a means of making themselves heard, of telling stories they rarely if ever had the chance to recount". As a result, the children used the tape recorder "as a means of projecting their voices to other audiences" (Ibid.). This technique has been used to great effect by organisations such as The Children's Radio Foundation to encourage young people to discuss pressing issues, share their views, and educate their peers (see <https://bit.ly/3xv9lo8>). The radio workshop methodology allowed the participants to ask their own questions

2 The parents of the participants from Siyapumelela insisted on providing their children with their own clean, sterilised blades for the act of circumcision. This points to an awareness of the potential danger of contracting HIV from other young men if the same ritual blade is used by the *ingcibi* (surgeon) on all the initiates. For a full account of the risks involved during circumcision rituals, see Meissner & Buso (2007).

around key points of interest and give them an opportunity to listen to and reflect on what their peers had to say. During the radio workshops, a number of interesting topics were discussed: young people's thoughts about traditional African medicine and healing; the relationship that they saw between traditional African healing and HIV/AIDS; and a recent phenomenon that many young people were involved with – *amakhosi* spirit possession. In order to have a clearer understanding of the significance of *amakhosi* spirit possession, it is necessary to review some key features of Traditional African Medicine and healing in South Africa.

Traditional African Medicine and healing

A key feature of Traditional African Medicine and healing is that it is holistic in nature and mimics the life cycle. Traditional Health Practitioners (THPs) who practice Traditional African Medicine, monitor and assist (often through ritual) in key moments in people's lives – from courting to marriage; pre-conception, conception, pregnancy, and birth; mothering and fathering; naming and initiations; counselling and dealing with death, infirmity and disease; to post death counselling – what Mayeng (2009:2) refers to as the African healing cycle. The fundamental premise of traditional African healing is different to that of biomedicine, for instance, in that it seeks to answer the immediate questions “why me?, why now?” in order to uncover and treat the underlying causes of illness, misfortune and affliction (Ashforth, 2005; Wreford, 2008). Such an approach differs from that of biomedicine, which seeks to understand illness by treating symptoms of the physical body and not necessarily the cause of social or psychic imbalance. As Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:8-9) have argued, biomedicine is fundamentally driven by scientific principles, which promote the mechanistic concept of ‘the Cartesian body’; a concept that fails to acknowledge the possibility of a “‘mindful’ causation’ of illness (with the notable exclusion of the fields of psychiatry and psychology). Traditional African healing, on the other hand, views the body as part of a “cyclical structure” (Wreford, 2005a:57), simultaneously considering the social, spiritual, emotional, physical and non-material aspects of an individual (Ngubane, 1992).

Traditional African Medicine and healing is characterised by a reverence for ancestral authority, which is established through ties of clan and kinship. Treatment and responses to affliction therefore may involve “addressing, and if need be,

altering, relationships, both material and spiritual" (Wreford, 2005a:57) within the domestic family unit. For many young people in South Africa, however, clan and kinship relations remain highly fragmented due to the vicissitudes of colonialism and apartheid; vicissitudes that have had a direct result on health and health practices. Black family units have not only been highly disrupted and fragmented as a result of the migrant labour system (Bank, 2002), but continue to be affected by the disproportionate effects of racialised capitalism (Robins, 2008). For many young people, the disruption of the domestic unit has meant an environment in which the African healing cycle is either fragmented or simply no longer exists. This has left many young people either vulnerable and without the support of the institution of the family, or in some cases, responsible for maintaining and supporting their families. Young people are, in a sense, forced to look beyond the domestic unit for avenues of social, economic and psychosocial support. New, fluid forms of domesticity have emerged that do not simply challenge the basis of African traditional healing but also open up new possibilities for the role that traditional African forms of healing could play in offering avenues of support to young people.

African healing practices contain elements of the spiritual alongside cultural notions of deviancy, pollution and cleansing (Ngubane, 1977) in understanding affliction, healing and cure. *Izangoma* (isiZulu) or *Amagqirha* (isiXhosa) are 'diviner-healers' who appeal to the ancestors for help in diagnosing problems and prescribing remedies, and routinely check to see if illness or misfortune is caused as a result of violated cultural traditions or cultural institutions. As many cultural practices are "designed to preserve cultural institutions" (Freeman & Motsei, 1992:1186) the issue of flouting cultural norms brings to the fore questions of deviancy and blame, but also a sense of duty in maintaining cultural traditions. In isiXhosa, the notion of disease is characterised by the word *isifo*, which relates to a disease that is manifest by somatic symptoms, to various forms of misfortune, but also to a state of vulnerability to misfortune and disease (Ngubane, 1977:22). According to traditional South African notions of affliction, some diseases are seen as a result of natural causes, while others as a result of *umthakathi* (most commonly translated as 'witchcraft'); a clear distinction is made between 'natural' illnesses and 'man-made' illnesses (Ashforth, 2005; Ngubane, 1977; Hunter, 1936; Hammond-Tooke, 1962). For example, in isiXhosa, any slight illness (*umkhuhlane*), such as a cold or headache, is understood to be naturally caused (Hunter,

1936:272), whilst other illnesses or experiences of misfortune may be seen as being 'maliciously sent' (*ukuthakatha*) (Hammond-Tooke, 1962:264), either by someone out of spite or jealousy, or as a sign of warning from the ancestors. In the first instance, where *ukuthakatha* is associated with jealousy, 'witchcraft' can be used against people who experience repeated success; material or otherwise. People who experience success might feel themselves vulnerable to the jealousy of neighbours or relatives, and might even take measures to protect themselves from potential acts of 'witchcraft'. In the second instance, one's ancestors are seen as being able to make one vulnerable to disease and misfortune if they feel they have been neglected or wronged. This most often happens when a person does not fulfil the required rituals or sacrifices in their honour or remembrance. Such rituals are strongly linked to the African healing cycle (Mayeng, 2009), and can be expensive to maintain, especially in the case of animal sacrifice. For example, when a child is born, a Xhosa family is expected to perform a ritual sacrifice of a goat in a naming ceremony known as *imbeleko*, in order to introduce the new born child to the ancestors in return for their recognition and protection. A similar ritual is performed in seeking protection for Xhosa boys who are about to undergo their initiation into manhood (*ulwalukho*). In cases where such rituals are not performed, a person may feel vulnerable to the potential wrath of their ancestors, which Ashforth (2005:128) has described in relation to the sense of vulnerability, as spiritual insecurity.

Spiritual insecurity stems mainly from the realisation that, as men were drawn away from the everyday affairs of the domestic unit, they were unable to fulfil their ritual responsibilities in maintaining the ancestral cult. This sense of fragility surrounding the ancestral cult, along with the cross-generational trauma of apartheid, continues to affect young people's sense of identity to this day. As Judith Lewis-Herman (1992:51) reminds us:

Traumatic events...breach the attachment of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

What traumatic events, such as apartheid, call into question are basic human relationships. Like many experiences of trauma, apartheid has damaged relational life in the ways it has affected "the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (Lewis-Herman, 1992:51). Within Xhosa communities,

as this link has been traditionally mediated through an ancestral connectivity, an individual could secure the blessings of the ancestors and affirm their identity within the larger community by appeasing the ancestors at various moments within the South African healing system. However, due to the fragmentation of the 'traditional' South African domestic unit, many of the traditions integral to the maintenance of ancestral connectivity within the South African healing cycle have ceased to be possible. As Ashforth (2005:128) explains:

...custodians of African tradition have long been both too few and too many; too few because many families have been unable to reproduce the traditions of their ancestors; too many because few communities have formed around a shared sense of local cultural continuity.

Despite the fact that many cultural practices have been abandoned, young people are sensitive to the belief that their ancestors – “the primary source of spiritual security” (Ashforth, 2005:128) within the domestic unit – might harbour anger and resentment against them for not being properly acknowledged. Coupled with the continued traumas that have resulted from a turbulent history, and compounded by on-going experiences of social structural violence, the feeling that the ancestors have withdrawn their protection has led to an overwhelming sense of vulnerability. As Janoff-Bulman (1985, cited in Lewis-Herman, 1992:51) explains, the sense of abandonment and vulnerability that result from traumatic events can destroy an individual’s “fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation”. And as Eagle and Kaminer (2013:89) have suggested, individuals in contexts of continuous uncertainty, more especially continuous traumatic stress, often develop concerns about the loss of control they feel with respect to the likelihood of facing future dangers or uncertainties, and therefore find ways to devote their energies to managing the anxiety associated with these imagined or real possibilities; “when the primary focus of traumatic awareness is upon anticipated danger, it is likely that thinking is dominated by fantasies of what might occur and ways of avoiding this” (Ibid). I would argue that in much the same way that continuous traumatic stress operates, the appropriation of *amakhosi* spirit possession is a response to managing the imagined uncertainties that result from a deep seated sense of social, structural, and spiritual vulnerability, linked to particular contextual stressor conditions within a complex temporality, and the complexity of discriminating between real, perceived or imagined threats in the absence of external protective systems.

Amakhosi spirit possession

Several township schools in Nelson Mandela Bay say they have been hit by a storm of unruly and violent pupils who believe they are invincible after paying sangomas to contaminate them with 'evil powers'.

The Herald, 2 December 2008

These opening lines from an article entitled "Chaos as Pupils Buy Powers to Become Invincible", reveal the violent nature of *amakhosi* spirit possession. Similarly, in Makhanda's local newspaper, the *Grocott's Mail* (28 October 2008), *amakhosi* spirit possession was described as a "new fad" (Sibiya, 2008) where possessed students were wreaking havoc in classrooms by threatening their teachers or acting out in displays of violence. This article described *amakhosi* spirit possession as imparting 'power' to young people "through the use of herbs for protection against bullies, negative spirits and the like" (Sibiya, 2008). Although descriptions of *amakhosi* spirit possession is variable (Meveni, 2014; Ntombana & Meveni, 2015), they are primarily invoked as a means of offering protection; protection from both malevolent occult forces as well as the dangers encountered in everyday life.

During the radio workshops, many of the participants were very vocal about the issue of violence in schools as a result of amakhosi gangs, who invoke amakhosi spirits to fight each other during recess. As one student from a prominent township school in Makhanda explained, when someone invokes *amakhosi* spirits, "their voices change, they speak different languages, their eyes turn red and they become very aggressive" (Sibiya, 2008). These radical displays of aggression are an evident challenge to social institutions, like schools, that seem to be failing many students. At the time of the research, there was significant social unrest over the delivery of basic social services, no less so in many schools, where teachers had been striking for weeks on end (see. Parker & Pillay, 2010). The various newspaper reports³ that circulated at the time around the sudden surge of amakhosi spirit possession seemed to show is that young people access amakhosi spirits as a means of venting both their frustrations about the inefficacy of the schooling system and their lack of agency over the situation.

3 See *The Herald*, 'Chaos as pupils buy "powers to become invincible"', 2 December 2008, 7; *Grocott's Mail* 'The spirits are speaking through us', in *Grocott's Mail*, 28 October 2008; and later, *The Daily dispatch*, 'Possessed pupils upset East London School', 20 February 2012.

Interestingly, the word *amakhosi* comes from the plural form of the isiZulu word *inkosi*, which means a 'king' or a 'supernatural being' and is similar to the isiXhosa word 'Nkosi', which can also refer to 'God' or a 'chief'. The choice to appropriate a word from isiZulu is significant for a number of reasons: firstly, there is a long history of imagined and real antagonism between the Zulu and the Xhosa people (Hamilton, 1998), and due to the negative, and potentially dangerous attributes inherent in *amakhosi* spirit possession, it is not surprising that these dangerous spirits are thought to come from elsewhere; secondly, many forms of African traditional healing attribute power to the distant past (Rekdal, 1999), where foreign (i.e. not belonging to that specific cultural heritage) spirits are perceived as being more powerful. As a result of these spirits coming from elsewhere, as described in the radio workshops, when under the influence of an *amakhosi* spirit, a person is supposedly able to speak in different languages, giving impetus to the mysterious and foreign nature of these spirits. Ntombana & Meveni (2015:5) further suggest that the connection to the word for 'king' or 'chief' emphasises the power, control and influence imbued by these spirits, which make them appear superior to and more powerful than local spirits. As such, *amakhosi* spirits are described as *amadoda amakhulu* ('superior men'), and give their possessor extraordinary power. With this power, however, the possessor is caught in a double-bind; because *amakhosi* spirits come from outside, they endow the possessor with strength and power, but at the same time, they are harder to predict and control.

The participants in the radio workshops made a clear distinction between good spirits and bad spirits. Despite their unpredictability, *amakhosi* are seen as good spirits in contrast to *amafufunyana*, which are evil spirits that invade a person's 'being' without their knowledge. *Amafufunyana* usually result from acts of malevolent witchcraft (Edwards, 1984; Ensink et al., 1998:884), where the person who performs the bewitchment takes ants that have been feeding on a dead body in a grave to make a poison (*idliso*) that is secretly given to the affected individual (Ntombana & Meveni, 2015:5). This can cause a person to start speaking a different language, most often isiZulu, and create extreme states of agitation and aggression. In contrast to *amafufunyana*, *amakhosi* spirits have been traditionally evoked to offer protection from witchcraft, or even to remove bad luck (*ukukhupha isimnyama*), and are even able to forewarn their possessors of incumbent danger (Ibid.). Ntombana & Meveni (2015:5-6) have further

suggested that a distinction can be made between 'orthodox', or traditional forms of *amakhosi* spirit possession and more recent appropriations of the practice. The story recounted below brings out this point:

I'm seated on a long, wooden bench waiting patiently to speak to a well-known sangoma named John. From where I sit, I can discern the musty smell of dried herbs from the neatly organised pharmacopeia hidden behind the counter. In the rafters above, a variety of animal skins and other non-distinct items hang from the dark ceiling. Next to me, two elderly men are chatting in hushed voices in a guttural Setswana. This would normally have struck me as odd considering that we are in the heart of the Eastern Cape, however, I know from a previous meeting that John is originally from Botswana. John trained as an in'ganga⁴ in Zimbabwe in 1973, after which he travelled to what was then the Eastern Transvaal to practice his trade. He later moved to Makhanda and opened his current practice called *Vuk'unzenzele* – 'Stand up and do it for yourself'.

"If you trained in Zimbabwe, how can you work as a *sangoma*?", I asked him naively the first time we met.

"The healing systems are very similar", he told me. "I have learnt to work with the Xhosa traditions".

I have made an appointment to talk to John about the issue of *amakhosi* spirit possession that many of the participants brought up in the radio workshops.

"Are *sangomas* responsible for giving these spirits to teenagers?", I ask him

"No, not at all", he replies indignantly. "We are the ones who have to fix this problem. It is these *ikhosis* (false healers) who tell the boys to drink this powder – *izizwe* – and it makes their stomach's grumble. This causes the sensation of *amakhosi*".

"And what are these *amakhosi* spirits?", I ask expectantly.

"They are like demons", he explains. "They are angry and that is why they give people extra strength. But they are not *amawethu* (our people/ancestors). They come from somewhere else. Us *sangomas* are against these things".

John tells me that *amakhosi* spirit possession is not a recent thing, but something that has been around for generations. Young men could use these spirits if they needed both strength and protection in times of war.

4 The word *in'ganga* is ChiShona for 'traditional healer' and is equivalent to the isiZulu word *inyanga* – or herbalist.

Young people today, however, are drawn to *amakhosi* spirits not only because they can offer a person protection, but because they are seen as dangerous and unpredictable. They seem to think it is a cool thing to do, but because they are not properly prepared, they are not able to control the spirits. It is left to trained *sangomas* like John to fix the problem and vanquish these spirits.

In this story, John blames false healers for encouraging young people to engage in *amakhosi* spirit possession. During the same interview, he explained that these charlatan healers had not been fully trained and were administering *amakhosi* spirits because they were poor and in need of money; it can cost between R150 and R300 for the initiation ritual. John was explicitly clear that true healers would never subject young people to these spirits, and that the people who have been doing so are damaging the reputation of traditional African healing.⁵ The article in *The Herald* (2 December 2008) on *amakhosi* spirit possession supported this claim in explaining that “herbalists and not sangomas are seen as responsible for transferring *amakhosi*... Sangomas are called by ancestors and are not allowed to administer medicine without the knowledge of family members. However, herbalists learn how to use medicine to do evil things and are not called by the ancestors” (Matomela, 2008).

During the radio workshops there were a variety of descriptions explaining how *amakhosi* spirits are invoked, although there seems to be a level of variation with regards to the process (Meveni, 2014; Ntombana & Meveni, 2015). From the participants’ accounts, a person is expected to provide a white chicken and a bottle of strong alcohol, such as gin, or stout beer, and in some cases cigarettes, for the initiation rituals (*amakhubalo*). The initiator is most often a ‘herbalist’, but in some cases can be a high-ranking member of an *amakhosi* gang, referred to as *ubaba* – or father. The initiator⁶ invokes the spirits by offering the chicken as a sacrifice. He then gives the recipient of the spirit a powder to drink, inviting the spirit into the person’s stomach.⁷ John called this powder *izizwe*, or ‘bad medicines’. The

5 One of the participants mentioned during the radio interview that his school had organised for a sangoma to address the learners and discourage them from engaging with *amakhosi* spirit possession.

6 In all cases, the initiator was described as a man, and in almost all cases, the initiates were boys.

7 For an interesting discussion on the biosociality of the gut in the context of nutrition on HIV/AIDS in South Africa. See Cousins, T. (2015) HIV and the remaking of hunger and nutrition in South Africa: Biopolitical specification after apartheid. *BioSocieties*, 10(2):143-161.

powder creates a sensation within the recipient's stomach that indicates that the spirit has entered. Once the spirit has been ingested, the recipient has to drink a strong alcohol to calm the spirit. The spirit is thought to imbibe the content of the alcohol, and as such, the initiate does not become drunk. One participant described *amakhosi* spirits as 'animals' which "reside in the stomach", and have to be placated with strong alcohol or they could act out against the recipient. Once the initiate has paid the full amount for the ritual, he is either given a small bottle containing a powder, which is worn on a beaded necklace, or sometimes a goatskin bangle that has been rubbed with powder.

After the spirit has been invoked, the recipient becomes subject to a number of taboos: firstly, he cannot drink any other alcohol other than what the spirit demands – this is usually a specific brand of gin or beer (such as Smirnoff or Castle mixed-stout); secondly, the recipient may not eat certain foods like pork or chillies, which are regarded either unclean (*inqambi*) by the spirit, or which might unsettle the spirit in the stomach. These taboos are kept in order to control and appease the spirit. In some cases, a recipient may receive more than one *amakhosi* spirit. Some of the participants explained that the more spirits one has, the stronger one may become, particularly when one is involved in a fight. This is how Lukhanyo explained it:

People who have them (*amakhosi* spirits) say that if you fight with someone, they take your side. Maybe you have 56 *amakhosi* and you give a person one punch, that person will get 56 punches. (Lukhanyo, 18)

Teenage boys seem to be attracted to the physical power gained from *amakhosi* spirits because it makes them appear more dangerous in a fight, and can protect them from bullies. The alcohol that is given to the *amakhosi* spirits is intended to add to the spirits' strength and power, as Sandile explained:

...I once saw them drinking iSmirnoff Gin and they drink iCastle milk-stout also, yes. I don't know for what good reason but they say they make them strong. You see, when they drink those stuff they say that they don't get drunk, only the things get drunk... (Sandile, 17)

A person that invites *amakhosi* spirits into their bodies is subsequently initiated into an existing gang. These gangs distinguish each other by wearing coloured beads around their necks. Such gangs offer both a sense of solidarity, as well as protection from potential violence, as Thabo explained:

It's like a group né, they wear the same colour, and the other group wears the same colour. And when they get together there are some groups, they are against each other. (Thabo, 20)

Amakhosi spirits offer a sense of protection against both real and imagined threats. They are seen to protect people from dangerous occult forces, such as witchcraft, as Lukhanyo explained:

Amakhosi is not like a negative thing. To us it is a positive thing. It's who we are...*Amakhosi* are there to protect you against *witchcraft* and all that stuff. (Lukhanyo, 18)

More specifically, *amakhosi* spirits have come to replace to protection normally afforded by a person's ancestors, and in some instances are even seen to protect one from the malevolent anger of one's ancestors. Thabo's description of *amakhosi* highlights this point:

S What does *amakhosi* mean?

T Um, the ancestors.

S But aren't the ancestors good?

T Ja, the ancestors are good but there are some, some of the ancestors that are not good that can kill people.

S Kill people! Why?

T It's because of, of the anger. You see, my ancestors want to protect me but they can't, and if I have the *amakhosi* then no one will touch me or hurt me.

An interesting connection can be drawn between the sense of control gained over the potentially negative influence of the ancestors as a result of the protection offered by *amakhosi* spirits and the loss of control of the individual due to the need to placate *amakhosi* spirits by drinking strong alcoholic beverages, such as gin. Much of the violence associated with *amakhosi* spirit possession can be attributed to the recipients' loss of inhibition; this is explained away as the *amakhosi* spirit's anger. This anger is often directed against authoritative structures or social circumstances seemingly beyond the control of the individual. What seems evident from these inferred displays of anger is that many young people feel helpless against the conditions produced by social structural violence. It seems as if the forms of social and structural insecurity endemic to structurally violent environments underpin young people's feelings of vulnerability to multiple forces beyond their control.

Amakhosi spirit possession is almost always the exclusive domain of teenage boys,⁸ and is used as a means of recapturing or (re)constructing a particular kind of masculinity. As Mfecane (2016:206) explains, the construct of masculinity refers to practices associated with being a real man, and in contemporary theory, is premised on a social constructivist paradigm where men are not born, but made. The cultural institution of *ulwaluko* is a key example. After undergoing *ulwaluko*, a Xhosa man is reincorporated into his community (Mahlhlo, 2009:51) and treated with respect (*uhlonipha*), which gives a person an elevated status in society.⁹ *Amakhosi* spirits are able to do much the same in that they give boys an increased sense of prestige due to the physical powers they impart on the recipient. Because *amakhosi* spirits are seen as dangerous and unpredictable, they engender a sense of fear and respect. For many young people, the fear associated with *amakhosi* spirits offers them a greater sense of security. In the Xhosa tradition, given the many expenses involved in undergoing *ulwaluko*, boys sometimes have to wait until their mid-twenties before their families are able to afford to 'send them to the bush'. This means that many young men who have not been able to undergo *ulwaluko* are socially excluded and treated like boys, regardless of their contemporaneous experiences with people of a similar age. This is evident from the fact that *ulwaluko* and *amakhosi* are considered to be mutually exclusive; a young person would not be allowed to attend initiation school with *amakhosi* spirits present in his being (Ntombana & Meveni, 2015). The inscribed identities associated with *amakhosi* spirit possession might therefore be appealing to older Xhosa teenage boys who have not yet been through their initiation into manhood. However, once completing *ulwaluko*, a young man belongs to a new social category known as *ubukrwala*, and will express a degrading sentiment with regards to *amakhosi*; '*yinto yamakhwenkwe hayi eyamadoda*' – which means "that thing is meant for boys and not men" (Ntombana & Meveni, 2015:6-7). This denunciation likely stems from a new-found sense of importance and social

8 For the most part, it seems that girls choose to remain on the periphery of *amakhosi* spirit possession, sometimes aligning themselves with certain *amakhosi* gangs. Although some of the participants mentioned during the radio-workshops that girls could partake in *amakhosi* spirit possession, I did not succeed in finding any girls who had actually done so.

9 All the participants were acutely aware of the notion of *uhlonipha* (respect). During one of the workshop sessions, some of the participants who had recently undergone the initiation rituals into manhood chose to group themselves together on the grounds that they could no longer associate with 'boys'. This caused feelings of tension between the two groups because, despite many of the participants being close in age, the group of men felt they were not being properly respected by the other participants.

capital on the part of newly formed young men, but also from the challenge that is issued by a competing form of masculinity. What is clear from this dynamic, however, is that young people rely on both social and cultural capital in advancing their agency in managing the entangled precarities evident in their lives.

Patricia Henderson (2016:87) has issued a challenge to the global circulation of reductionist stereotypes concerning the construction of children and young people in Africa as devoid of agency, 'pathologised', or seen as "ciphers of victimisation and vulnerability" (Ibid.) in the ways in which they are measured against the 'optimal' conception of childhood issuing from industrialised countries. Her work challenges the hegemonic view of childhood in Africa, largely maintained by the ideological underpinnings of human rights discourses, by showing that children and young people in African settings live *de facto* lives of immense variability and agency. As much as the young people described in this chapter are challenged by multiple experiences of vulnerability – be they social, economic, structural, or spiritual – they exhibit creative agency in how they choose to reimagine and reform their social worlds. Young people's appropriation of *amakhosi* spirit possession not only highlights a challenge to cultural institutions of masculinity in the face of seeming fragility and uncertainty, but significantly reveals the creative agency with which young people disentangle their lived experiences in making sense of multiple forms of precarity.

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