

"THE ANCESTORS ARE BEATING US": MEN, MIGRATION AND SPIRIT POSSESSION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: Although studies of migration have grown exponentially in recent years, their focus has for the most part been on individuals and groups moving from (rural) peripheries to (urban) centres, akin to the prophesies of mainstream modernist theory. In South Africa, formidable scholarship has tackled the challenges and opportunities, which urban milieus have provided for rural migrants. Much less attention has been paid to urban-rural movements and the transformations of identities, relations and powers, which these have engendered. This paper considers the dynamics of ancestral spirit possession in the case of TshiVenda-speaking migrant men and argues that urban-rural migration has constituted a significant, although highly contested and multi-faceted process in contemporary South African society. In particular, it aims to show that movements mediated by the notions and practices of spirit possession invoke experiences of place and gender, which problematise both local and analytical conceptions of "city" and "country," "centre" and "periphery," "manhood" and "womanhood."

Keywords: *Spirit possession, migration, gender, identity, South Africa*

Introduction

The long-prevailing teleological view of social change in sub-Saharan Africa, according to which rural-urban migration and subsequent "permanent urbanisation" constituted a dominant driving force of progressive socio-economic, political and cultural transformation (Gluckman 1960; Mitchell 1987; Wilson and Wilson 1968), has been revealed as untenable. Several authors have recently argued that the "rural" has (re-)gained, or retained, significance in contemporary lives of urban migrants, whether for reasons of providing, however

fragile, livelihoods in times of economic crisis (Ferguson 1992; 1999), place of proper burial (Gugler 2002), or conceptions of “roots” amenable to political manipulation (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998). As the present study aims to show, the “rural” – both as a “place” and a source of meanings, interpretations of experience and templates for actions, has become an important resource for individuals and groups addressing crises of personal and social well-being and continuity; but it can also be seen to “haunt” unsuspecting urbanites, rerouting their identities and movements, purportedly against their own will. I will address these dynamics in the case of “Venda” spirit possession, which has given rise to an intriguing interplay of “urban” and “rural,” “movement” and “emplacement,” “spirit illness” and “health,” “self” and “other,” “male” and “female,” in contemporary South African society.

The present study concentrates primarily on TshiVenda-speakers – male and female labour migrants – whom I had acquainted during fieldwork between 2004–6 in the region of the former “Venda” homeland in the Limpopo province,¹ and to a lesser extent in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Ancestor spirits, *midzimu* (sing. *mudzimu*), are held to “call” their living descendants to leave cities in Gauteng, conceptualised in the idiom of “place of whites,” *tshikuani*, resettle in rural “Venda,” undergo initiation and take up life-long profession as ancestral mediums and healers, *nganga* or *maine* in TshiVenda, practicing from the rural areas. The ancestral “call,” *mbidzo*, manifests itself first as a grave form of affliction both bodily and social plaguing labour migrants in the city, usually at the height of their urban careers. Settlement in the rural area in “Venda” and acceptance of the “call” ideally results in restoration of health and well-being². The categories of *tshikuani* and “Venda,” city and country, represent a salient dichotomy around which opposing meanings are organised in the life-histories of the possessed men: “illness” – “health,” “immorality” – “morality,” “capricious money” – “stable money,” respectively. I will discuss the extent to which these dichotomies have also been re-enacted in

- 1 Now officially the Vhembe district of the Thulamela municipality in Limpopo Province.
- 2 This socio-spatial and gender dynamics of spirit possession in the “Venda” context has so far been undocumented. Stayt (1931), Blacking (1985) and Ralushai (personal communication, May 2005) have argued that “Venda” spirit possession is a domain of rural women addressing problems of fertility and matrilineal descent in a society conceived as patrilineal and patriarchal.

practice by the possessed migrants and how they have oriented their actions as full-time ancestral mediums.

The above description of the possession predicament is, of course, a shorthand of very complex processes of personal, social and political transformations which this divinely inspired urban-rural movement entails, as will be shown below. Due to the limitations of the scope of this paper, I will concentrate on male labour migrants, involved in different stages of spirit possession and the ancestral "call." This choice of subject is deliberate, as men have been under-represented in studies of spirit possession worldwide. Furthermore, men have been more readily associated with labour migration, city and the public sphere in southern African anthropology, and their vigorous presence in the domain of the household in rural areas goes counter to gender presumptions, which this paper aims to question. Through spirit possession, men have been able to navigate the rural, private, domestic sphere of the household, and stretch its meanings and political significance in innovative and unprecedented ways. However, there are limits to which possessed men (and their spirits) can become agents in the changes to subjectivities and to social and cultural forms which spirit possession entails. In important respects, they are forced to change themselves in sometimes personally undesirable ways – appropriate complex skills, bodily techniques and knowledge, historically dominated and controlled by women, which challenge their gendered identities. Male ancestral mediums, thus, have limited opportunity to change some aspects of the socio-cultural forms of spirit possession in which, predominantly rural, women have retained the upper hand. It must also be stressed that the settlement in "Venda" associated with spirit possession is not a simple reintegration in a primordial community of origin – the migrants had often been born in *tshikuani*, or in a rural location other than that in which they have settled as ancestral mediums. Furthermore, their practices and strategies of healing self and others significantly realign social relations and identities in the rural areas and the very notions of "Venda."

Reluctant Mediums: Spirit Possession and Life-History

In the following section I will discuss the life-histories of five men, former labour migrants, in which they portray their spirit possession experience in the cities of Gauteng, and their recovery in “Venda.” The men come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds: elite business manager (Mulalo³) and university lecturer (Emmanuel), while three men (Lawrence, Thilivhali, Khathutshelo) positioned at the lowest rungs of the urban labour market, engaged in intermittent “piece job” on the mines, as cleaners, security guards, bus and taxi drivers. At the onset of symptoms associated with ancestral possession Mulalo and Emmanuel were in their early 40s, married, with children. Lawrence, Thilivhali and Khathutshelo were single in their late 20s and early 30s. All were sending remittances to dependent families in rural “Venda.”

In each case the onset of possession was associated with diffuse symptoms of chronic pains, anorexia, disorientation, tiredness, depression, sleeplessness and suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, according to their life-histories, the men suffered from inexplicable occurrences disrupting their work routines. Mulalo and Emmanuel would suddenly “lose voice” during presentations and lectures. Furthermore, substantial sums of money would mysteriously disappear from their bank accounts. Lawrence, Thilivhali and Khathutshelo experienced problems with instruments of work which would repeatedly break down beyond repair, their identity cards would disrupt employers’ databases, and, like Mulalo and Emmanuel, they were unable to “hold onto money,” *u fara tshelede*. All five men also described themselves as “naughty” at the time of their life in *tshikuani*, engaging in immoral behaviour, illicit affairs and drinking heavily. The afflicted men first sought biomedical treatment, *zwa tshikua* (lit. “things of whites”) and healing in African Independent Churches (especially the Zion Christian Church), but to no avail. Finally, and reluctantly, they consulted a “traditional” healer, *nganga*, who identified the agency of ancestor spirits as the cause of the men’s afflictions and lack of self-control. The men resented the diagnosis stipulating relocation to “Venda” and undergoing initiation to become *nganga*. However, further afflictions and suffering eventually made them abide by the spirits’ wishes. Once in “Venda” and undergoing treatment and initiation, all the men claimed to have experienced

3 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

significant improvement in health and social relations, regained self-discipline and control over flows of money.

There are problems in relying solely on life-histories when trying to understand socio-cultural phenomena and personal transformations. In retrospective life-histories complex and difficult negotiations and ambiguities often become portrayed as simple, clear-cut linear processes. Due to the constraints of fieldwork I was not able to spend several years with the possessed men in the cities in order to closely observe the dynamics of their affliction and negotiations for cure. However, when the narratives are considered as not simply reflections of "objective" history and experience "as it happened," but as meaningful tools with which people act upon their worlds, it is possible to analyse the way in which they reflect major concerns of individuals and the societies in which they live, and in turn, shape them. As Gardner puts it: "... narratives are first and foremost stories ... stories do not simply entertain or convey experience, they also comment upon it, and hence help to change it" (Gardner 2002: 2).

In their narratives, the men stressed that they shopped around for treatment before being forced by the gravity of their condition to consult a *nganga*. All the men stated the same sequence of options consulted – initially *zwa tshikua*, then Christian churches, finally *nganga* – which reflects the situation of medical pluralism in contemporary South Africa and a hierarchy of resort. However, as a standardised device in the narratives of possession, this sequence also had a rhetorical import. It was used to comment on the superior efficacy of "traditional" healing while at the same time stressing one's own reluctance to embrace it and accept the *mbidzo*; the men used the idiom *ndo mona mona*, literally "I was dodging," a period which in each case lasted 2 to 10 years. This ambivalence towards the "ancestral call" had several levels of significance. On the one hand, the men claimed that they did not want to get involved with "traditional" healing, *vhunganga*, as "it is difficult," *zwi a konda*, requiring a prolonged regime of medicines and rituals. Becoming a *nganga* is a psychologically and physically demanding process, it "hurts," *zwi a vhavha*, and it is for life. Moreover, Mulalo and Emmanuel explained that they were happy in the city, driving BMW's, enjoying the urban life-style. Lawrence, Thilivhali and Khathutshelo felt the pressure of their rural families to stay in *tshikuani*, and send their earnings to "Venda." On the other

hand, the claims of resistance to accept the ancestral “call” served as a legitimating device attesting to its genuineness – the longer the period of “dodging” lasted, the more the men had to leave behind (the BMW’s, houses, well-paid jobs), the more genuine the claim to be in contact with the ancestor spirits was seen to be.

There is a further reason why the men were reluctant to leave urban employment and settle in rural “Venda,” which relates to wider processes of migration and the ways in which they have been incorporated into cultural values regarding gender. The system of rural-urban migration, primarily of men, had been put in place by the colonial government since the 1880s, starting with the imposition of the hut tax, and has been further exacerbated by the dispossession of land of local African populations during the apartheid regime. A system whereby able-bodied (not only) “Venda” men were forced to migrate to the cities of Gauteng, especially to work in the mines, while women and children stayed in the rural areas partially relying on meagre agricultural produce and on remittances, was installed by the apartheid government in conjunction with the major owners of capital in order to secure a large supply of unskilled, cheap labour (Worden 2012). This system began to dissipate in the 1980s as mining and other industrial sectors in the cities were undergoing economic crisis (exacerbated since the 2000s) and as women increasingly migrated, on their own or with their husbands, to seek employment in the expanding service sectors of the urban economy. Against this background it is striking that when I interviewed men and women in “Venda” during 2004–6 they viewed the gendered structure of the forceful system of rural-urban migration as “our culture,” *mvelele yashu*. According to this cultural ideal, men are supposed to migrate to the city to seek employment and send money for bags of mealie meal (*saga a mugayo*) to women (wives, sisters, mothers, grandmothers) remaining in rural “Venda.”

The dynamics of ancestor possession of the male labour migrants, and their reluctance to accept it, has to be seen in this context. For by accepting “the call” and leaving the city, *tshikuani*, the men subverted this gendered ideal of labour migration. The notion that “it is our culture” that the man works in *tshikuani* (also rendered as *tsheledeni*, lit. “place of money”) sending remittances to the rural area, has been articulated also by the possessed men themselves, acknowledging that

due to the ancestral call they were incapable of standing up to the ideal with which they associated self-esteem; returning to "Venda" entailed a degree of emasculation. In all cases, the families of the possessed men also resented their return to "Venda." The case of Lawrence is instructive in this context. Lawrence, now a man in his 80s, had become a migrant worker and suffered from possession illness in *tshikuani* during the 1950s. In his case, a compromise was made with the ancestors. The family pleaded with the spirits that Lawrence was still too young to quit wage work and the spiritual "gift," *mpho*, was hung on a fig tree for the next three decades. Only during the 1980s, at the end of his labour career, did Lawrence relocate to "Venda" to start practicing as a *nganga*. No such compromise was possible for the four men in labour migration during the 1980s (Thilivhali), 1990s (Mulalo, Emmanuel) and 2000s (Khathutshelo). The possessing spirits seem to have gained more power to force migrants to return to "Venda" only since the 1980s, corresponding to the gradual dissipation of the apartheid system of rural-urban labour migration.

While ancestor possession of male labour migrants is subversive of dominant values of masculinity in relation to labour migration, it also constitutes a critical commentary on the conditions of work in the urban centres. In all cases the ancestors manifested themselves by disrupting work routines. However, they did so in significantly different ways in conjunction to the relative socio-economic position of the possessed men. While the elite men "lost voice," the men positioned at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy experienced problems with external, material means of work and anonymising regimes of identity control at the work place. The fact that it was their own body-self and agency, which was problematised in possession in the case of elite men, is a reflection of relatively more control over work processes and their own identity which they had in the urban workplace. By contrast, possession of the men of the urban underclass expressed the consciousness of being more "a cog in a machine," projecting agency to instruments of labour.

Life-History Revisited: Healed in "Venda"?

In their life-histories, all possessed men claimed to have been cured and regained self-control once living in the rural area in "Venda" and

undergoing initiation and practicing as *nganga*. However, during my fieldwork these outcomes seemed to be more ambivalent. At the time when I met Mulalo, Emmanuel, Lawrence and Thilivhali during my fieldwork in “Venda,” they were already established as *nganga* in various rural locations. Only Mulalo and Lawrence appeared to be fully prospering, both in relation to their health and the healing profession. Mulalo had established a significant renown as a successful healer, offering his services to elite clientele from local areas as well as Gauteng, who often also had experience of study or work in Europe or the USA. Lawrence complemented his healing practice with “traditional” arts and crafts venture based in the local urban centre, Thohoyandou, but insisted he could only communicate with his ancestors and attend to clients at his rural home on the outskirts of Sibasa (on which more below). Thilivhali, on the other hand, appeared to struggle. He suffered from recurrent symptoms of ancestor sickness – especially pain in shoulders and head⁴ – which had to be repeatedly treated by further conduct of (financially taxing) possession rituals in order to regain momentary respite. Moreover, he had problems attracting clients and struggled with his two wives and children in dire poverty.

Emmanuel appeared to be stretching his authority as a healer, as well as the very notions of how ancestors may intervene in human life, to their limits – as had been perceived by his clients as well as his initiator. He charged extortionate fees for medicines purportedly curing HIV/AIDS, abused women clients by the conduct of “x-rays” of their naked bodies and stopped paying rent claiming the ancestors would take care of the debt. By 2006 he had his property looted by a mob and visited his initiator every other day for treatments (incisions and fumigations) to protect himself from enemies. His moral and psychological integrity as a *nganga* was substantially shaken. During my fieldwork Khathutshelo was still undergoing treatment and initiation, however, his health and self-confidence seemed to have been improving. I will analyse the social and personal dynamics of Khathutshelo’s treatment and initiation in more detail in the next section, especially in relation to power and gender. Whether Khathutshelo will be “cured” and prosper as a *nganga*, however, remains to be seen.

4 Ancestral agency is held to typically manifest itself in this manner, while witchcraft targets the stomach or belly, *dangani*; for both conditions the idiom of *u liwa*, lit. “being eaten,” is used.

Spirit Identities and Gender Dynamics of Spirit Possession

The possibility, and plausibility, of spirit possession is part of more widely shared notions held by TshiVenda-speakers in South Africa regarding ancestral agency intervening in the lives of individuals and kin groups. The ancestors are seen as operating for the benefit but also, more frequently, to the detriment of human lives. Although the relationship between the ancestors, “those bellow” (*vha fhasi*) and living humans is essentially seen as contractual and amenable to manipulation, the ancestors’ disposition towards humans is said to be in the first degree violent and coercive: “the ancestors are beating us” (*vhadzimu vha lwa rine*). They do so either directly through their own agency, or by withholding protection and “opening paths” (*u vhala dzindila*) for evil such as witchcraft, *muloi*, to strike the intended victims. The ancestors may act out of dissatisfaction with immoral conduct of humans or improper burial, or just be expressing the desire to be acknowledged and celebrated. Humans can negotiate with wrathful spirits through invocations (*u semana semana*, lit. “to scold”) and propitiation acts – spirit possession (primarily *tshela* and *malombo*⁵), rituals of “returning the grandparent” (*u vhuisa makhulu*) and collective feasts of kin groups. According to my informants, improper burials are nowadays a frequent cause for the ancestors to be troublesome, a situation reflected in the conduct of a rising number of rituals to “return the ancestors.” Overwhelmingly, these cases involve individuals (mostly men) who had died, often violently, in *tshikuani* without obtaining family burials and those whose bodies have remained buried in house yards after whole families had been forcefully relocated as a result of apartheid’s policies of population removal during the 1960s – 1980s. The rituals of *vhuisa makhulu* are a significant counterpoint to spirit possession against the background of the wider dynamics of movement and dis/placement: while in the former case it is the ancestor spirits who achieve mobility through their descendants, in the latter case the descendants are ultimately “moved” by the ancestors so that they may be appropriately emplaced.

5 *Tshela* is often the first stage of spirit possession rituals and carried out in a kneeling position to the accompaniment of rattles, while *malombo*, or *ngoma dza midzimu* (“drum of the ancestors”), *ngoma yo ima* (“drum of standing up”), is a final stage performed in a standing posture to the accompaniment of drum beating, as well as rattle shaking.

In “Venda” spirit possession, three categories of ancestor spirits, *vhadzimu*, are recognised and become the focus of ritual activities – *Ndau* (lit. “lion”) spirits traced to the Kalanga of Zimbabwe, Venda spirits, and ancestors of Shangaan (Tsonga) descent. In terms of strength and power, and associated prestige of the possessed host, *Ndau* stand at the apex of the spirit hierarchy with Venda spirits closely following, and Shangaan being regarded as the weakest. Strength refers to the power of the ancestor to afflict the individual in a most severe manner, to the vigorousness of the spirit’s/host’s dancing necessary during possession rituals, and to the healing ability of the spirit/host. The spirits’ hierarchy closely reflects conceptions of ethnic relations. Kalanga are collectively identified as the group from which the VhaVenda ultimately originated some 200 years ago, hence their prestige. On the other hand, historical relations between Shangaan and Venda have been strained by conflict (Harries 1991: 106), and Shangaan living among the Venda have been treated as a pariah group (I was frequently warned by Venda informants not to visit Shangaan communities for the danger of being robbed, raped or contracting illnesses). In this light it is understandable that Shangaan spirits are ascribed least power. In fact, they are held to be transferable by a coin smeared in goat blood to an unsuspecting victim, who picks up the treated object – however, I had never encountered a person possessed in this way during my fieldwork. Moreover, each of the spirit groups is associated with different medicines, dancing styles, spirit languages and cloths. The “Venda” spirit possession rituals, the *tshela* and *malombo*, are associated with *Ndau* and Venda ancestors, *majomane* with Shangaan spirits. So in “Venda” spirit possession a degree of ethnic diversity is acknowledged, but always subsumed to the principle of descent – ancestors plague only one’s own living kin. Moreover, while possession rituals may be performed for individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Sotho, Zulu, Tswana, etc., but always with some, even distant, Kalanga, Venda or Shangaan lineage connections), they cannot be conducted anywhere but on “Venda” territory. This relative conservatism of “Venda” possession stands in contrast to other South African contexts where possession rituals are readily conducted also in urban contexts (Janzen 1991), and to neighbouring societies (such as Mozambique) where possessing ancestors may not necessarily be related through descent relationship with the host at all (Igreja, Dias-Lambranca and Richters 2008).

In the following case study of one of the possessed men, Khathutshelo, I shall address the dynamics of spirit possession ritual and initiation in relation to gender and power. As was noted above, Khathutshelo's masculine identity has been challenged by his having to quit wage work in the city and settling in "Venda" as part of the ancestral "call." While in the rural area, he has been reliant on his female relatives, sisters and maternal aunt for care and funding of his initiation process, further reversing the signs of gender dependency. The spirits afflicting Khathutshelo were identified as his mother's father and mother's mother's sister, of the "Venda" category. Many authors have argued that when "...various spirits of different sexes may enter the medium and provide alternate versions of gender, thus displacing the dominant gender hierarchies. ... the person possessed by spirits is given the chance to play, to present a range of choices and alternatives within which people can locate themselves" (Behrend and Luig 2000: xvii). As will be shown in the context of a man possessed by both male and female spirits, playfulness with gender categories is limited in the "Venda" context. Khathutshelo, and his spirits, had very little opportunity to dislodge gender scripts of spirit possession in which women and female performance styles and techniques have predominated.

Khathutshelo was born in 1972 in Thohoyandou where he grew up and finished standard 10. He then went on to study in Pretoria, but did not finish college education due to lack of financial resources. He stayed on in Pretoria and from 2001 worked as a cleaner, miner and dishwasher. He recounted that while working in the mine, he began to suffer from several conditions, later ascribed to the agency of ancestor spirits. He had swellings in different parts of his body and pains in the head, arms, shoulders and legs. Furthermore, strange incidents started to disrupt his work routines in the mine. His identity card was repeatedly not working, when his identity and fingerprints were checked by his employer they could not be verified, and the computer system spontaneously shut down. Moreover, the women whom Khathutshelo dated were constantly leaving him. He began wandering around the city suburbs, disoriented, and dreaming of white goats, *mbudzi tshena* (associated with ancestor spirits), grazing on riverbanks. By December 2005, Khathutshelo had to leave *tshikuani* for "Venda" where he stayed with the sister of his deceased mother in the rural area. His sisters took care of him while all he could do was

lie in bed. In May 2006 I met Khathutshelo at his initiator's (Dakalo) household where he had already been undergoing initiation to become a healer, a process known as *u twasa*.

I took part in a spirit possession ritual, *tshela*, organised for Khathutshelo on a winter Saturday in July 2006. The *tshela* was held in Dakalo's household in a remote village accessible only by a long trip on a bumpy dirt road from Thohoyandou. The gathering consisted of Dakalo, her three female initiates, her brother, Khathutshelo's sisters coming all the way from Johannesburg where they work, twelve elder women – neighbours and friends of Dakalo, and a young drunkard man from the neighbourhood. Khathutshelo's mother's sister paid for the ceremony, while Khathutshelo's sisters supplied the chickens, beer and "cold drinki" (Fanta and Sprite). The guests gathered into a hut which became densely occupied, and seated, started playing rattles and singing at about 9 p.m., creating a circle around Khathutshelo who, kneeling, began to make tentative attempts at swinging his head and torso back and forth. After about two hours the singing and music suddenly broke off. The elder women began to complain that Khathutshelo was not dancing with enough skill and vigour. The company moved to a room in the adjacent house and a series of exchanges between Khathutshelo and the female audience began. The women jokingly scolded Khathutshelo for slacking, commenting that the young generation was lazy and "good for nothing," not as brave as the elders, and that they all came in vain because no spirit would be satisfied enough with the young man's efforts to be lured to descent into his body. Khathutshelo, also in a joking manner, retorted that he was not like the elder women, used to kneeling on the ground, and to painful movements since he was born like the women were. One elder woman, nevertheless, encouraged Khathutshelo not to be afraid of pain and exhaustion and when the spirit would descend upon him, he would feel "godfree." Dakalo smeared more medicines on Khathutshelo's body (*u vhumabela*) to ease his movements and make him attractive to the ancestor spirits.

Then the party returned to the hut and resumed singing and playing the shakers, with Khathutshelo visibly making much more effort in his dancing. Finally, about an hour later, Khathutshelo's movements intensified until he fell prostate on the floor. He was covered with a blanket and a calabash of water was brought to him. He began licking

the water like a wild animal, patted on the face by Dakalo. Then the spirit revealed his identity – it was his mother’s father who demanded *phalu* (red-white patterned cloth), *nzheti* (blue-white cloth), *tonga* (walking stick) and a hat. Still covered in a blanket, Khathutshelo – now the spirit – was brought to the house to change his attire and returned, dignified, to the hut where the company greeted him by hand clapping and ululating while lying on the floor. The spirit greeted the audience by hand claps and the music and dancing resumed. In another hour Khathutshelo fell again, this time he was possessed by a distant female relative, *vhomakhulukuku*, mother’s mother’s sister. More dancing and singing followed, with members of the audience now coming into the centre of the circle to dance alongside Khathutshelo’s spirit, until early hours of the morning. At about 8 a.m. Khathutshelo’s spirit retired into the house and the audience feasted on refreshments, commenting on the night’s events, still joking about how clumsy and inadequate Khathutshelo’s movements had been, mimicking them and laughing. Khathutshelo’s sister immediately made a phone call to the mother’s sister to inform her that the *tshela* was a success and the ancestors had come and accepted the human endeavours.

The following lyrics were sung to the accompaniment of rattles:

*Vuwani, vuwani lotsha	Wake up, wake up, we greet you
Ri a gonya	We are climbing uphill
Ndi a vhona ngoma	I see ngoma
Zwi a vhavha ngoma, u tshina zwi a konda	Ngoma hurts, to dance is difficult
Madambi a nga mu fholi	The witchcraft cannot be gotten rid of
Makhulu vho swika	The ancestors came
Kha vha de vha tungule tangu	Let’s come and throw the divining bones
Nwana uyo vha mu vhonisani wee	This child, hey, you must see him/her
Vhomaine zwinvhe zwithu zwi no konda, ndi do kondelela	Healer, some things are very difficult but I will persevere
Vha I vhona mbudzi tshena, yowee	You are seeing white goat, hey
Ndo hwala mihwalo mihuluhulu	I was carrying a very heavy load
Ndi a tuwa vhusiku vhonoyu	I am leaving this very night

The lyrics sung during Khathutshelo’s *tshela* were not particularly gendered, referring to encouragement and greetings, associating

spirit possession with back-breaking work which humans, addressed as “children,” undergo on behalf of their deceased kin, *vhomakhulu*, to make them once again present in their midst. While the songs did not relate to a particularly female experience, the bodily postures, movements and costumes did. The general atmosphere of *tshela* is serious and dignified, except during the interlude in which joking and riposte is allowed or even stipulated. The ancestors behave in a supremely dignified manner, and must be treated accordingly by the living human participants. What is important for the present argument is that the dignity expressed through spirit possession rituals draws on distinctly female experience and techniques of the body. *Tshela* is carried out in a posture of kneeling on the floor, bearing the upper torso naked with a cloth wrapped around the waist (the proper female attire), and moving back and forth the upper part of the body. Gestures of greeting the ancestors, *u losha*, consisting in kneeling or lying prostrate on the floor, clapping hands and ululating, are important performance forms, and in mundane contexts a typically female conduct carried out most frequently in deference to men in authority such as chiefs or elders.

The performative forms of spirit possession are firmly grounded in women’s experience of conduct and body techniques. This may – as in the instance of Khathutshelo – lead to tensions and difficulties when men attempt to appropriate them. It is a significant fact that the audience, whose role it was to transmit knowledge and power associated with spirit possession to the inchoate initiate, were (elder) women, while the recipient of this knowledge and power was a (young) man. Such a distinctly gendered and generational scenario was reflected by all participants during the interlude. In it, spirit possession ritual, as an overarching commentary on the continuities of gender and generation, also became an occasion for the participants to reflect on the differences and rifts between these categories. However, the older generation – of women – scolded the younger man for not being used to pain and suffering, for not trying hard enough and for not being a plausible host of the ancestors; Khathutshelo joked precisely about the ridiculousness of the painful body postures and exhausting movements to which women “in the countryside” so readily obey all their life – none of the participants questioned the overarching consensus that the ancestors solicited the young man to become their

human medium. About the possibility of men being called by their ancestors there was no question, only about their individual aptitudes.

The gender tensions in contemporary spirit possession in which women act as guardians of the "Venda tradition," "of long ago," *zwa tshivenda*, *zwa sialala*, while men aspire to appropriate it and make their own, can be illustrated by a further example. During the initial stages, learning to recognise and "read" divination bones and administer medicines, *mushonga*, formed only a minor part of Khathutshelo's initiation process. Most of his time was spent carrying out distinctly women's household tasks such as sweeping, washing dishes, carrying loads, helping with the harvesting and processing of corn. Khathutshelo did not show much enthusiasm doing "woman's work," *mushumo ya mufhumakhadzi*, as he commented, and even tried to defy the prescribed embodied signs of being an initiate, *twasana*. On one occasion he appeared in the yard with the salemore cloths wrapped around his shoulders instead of around his hips (cloths worn around the hips being a distinctly female practice among "Venda" women, as seen above), that is, in a way which he perceived as more "manly." Immediately, however, his innovation attracted a shower of critique and reprimand from the women in the household, including Dakalo. Khathutshelo was forced to change his attire to fit the prescribed female-derived norm: the women in control of knowledge and power in spirit possession prevented Khathutshelo from pushing the cult's rules to encompass more "masculine" bodily experience.

Domestic Men: Reconfiguring Gender and Household

Men afflicted by ancestor spirits have to immerse themselves in activities carried out from within the sphere of the household, *mudi*, throughout their initiation and healing careers. I have already addressed the gender dynamics, which this immersion entails for the initiation phase in the case of Khathutshelo. Here I wish to add a few more notes on the redefinition of the household sphere and gender in the case of full-fledged practicing male healers. The central feature of being a male *nganga* in the "Venda" context is a state of radical boundedness to own's household. This boundedness entails not only the fact that a *nganga* practices his healing arts from within a hut or a room specially consecrated to the ancestors (and has trouble doing so

anywhere else) and that the whole household sphere assumes the role of providing a base for preparing medicines and conducting healing rituals for clients. It also means that the household is construed as a sphere where health and well-being of the *nganga* himself is maintained – leaving the household for prolonged periods of time results in remission of symptoms of the original possession illness to the initiated men. The male healers with whom I worked claimed to be able to attend to clients in different regions of South Africa, such as *tshikuani*, only for short spans of time, after they had propitiated their ancestors properly. Doing otherwise meant risking potentially grave illness and misfortune. Geschiere (2003: 167) has argued that in central and southern Africa “... a *nganga* should never stay too long in his own village, because he will become a deadly danger to his own relatives. Indeed, *nganga* are often at the margins of the kinship organization; in many respects, they are nomadic figures, not closely tied to a specific locality.” Such a nomadic existence would invite great peril for the *nganga* in the “Venda” context, a fact which attests to the difficulties of making far-reaching generalisations of a region, and of an institution, which has been historically marked by salient local differences and ramifications.

The radical emplacement of men as *nganga* in the household has many repercussions for the significance of gender, the “domestic” sphere and for the wider socio-economic and micro-political milieus. In many respects, male *nganga* have assumed responsibilities culturally ascribed to women. In the case of Mulalo, Emmanuel and Lawrence gender roles have become reversed. The wives of these healers were involved in labour migration, commuting to work in local urban centres (Thohoyandou and Sibasa), while their husbands stayed at home, combining healing activities and household chores with looking after children. Only Thilivhali was accompanied by two wives at home, who carried out most of the household work, including the processing (grinding, burning, cooking) of medicines.

However, while male *nganga*, through their positioning within the household sphere, often acquired female characteristics, they also imprinted the domestic sphere with new meanings and roles through their healing activities. Through divinations and therapeutic procedures the *nganga* became involved in the micro-politics of kin groups, households and neighbourhoods, channelling conflicts in

specific ways, stressing ancestral agency as the ultimate cause of all misfortune. This stance was explicitly articulated in contradistinction to interventions of biomedicine and Christian churches, *kereke*, which were judged to be ineffective where ancestors (and witchcraft) were involved, thus playing into competitive tensions between therapeutic options. Households of *nganga* also became important social centres during the conduct of spirit possession rituals where solidarity of, often trans-local, groups was strengthened in relation to dangerous "others" who may try to disrupt the proceedings. The households of *nganga* served as important platforms of public opinion and social critique as clients waiting for procedures discussed events of the day, voiced opinions regarding the conduct of kin, neighbours, chiefs, prophets and other *nganga*.

Money and the Moral Economy of Healing

Moreover, through healing practice, the domestic sphere of the household has become tightly knit into wider socio-economic structures, which are mediated by monetary exchange. Divinations, administration of medicines and ancestral rituals were thoroughly permeated by monetary transactions. The clients were responsible for paying for therapeutic interventions, even if they were close kin of the *nganga*. The rationale behind these transactions, however, was not remuneration for services provided. The *nganga* frequently explained to clients not keen to pay that the money is not for them, the healers, themselves – the ancestors would make their mediums very sick if they were not paid in money or did not accept payment. The monetary relationship of remuneration for a service was thus redefined as a moral, and literally vitally necessary, obligation of humans to their ancestors to ensure access to knowledge, success and bare survival.

Money, in the form of banknotes and coins, although conceived as inseparable from the moral economy of healing, was nevertheless regarded with caution as potentially dangerous, "hot", *fhisa*. Banknotes and coins could not be passed from hand to hand between the client and the healer, but had to be laid down on the floor and then sprinkled with snuff by the healer or his initiate. Only then could they be accepted and tucked away. Furthermore, limits applied to how money thus acquired could be used. Legitimate uses of money acquired from healing practice included the provision of members of own household

with every day necessities and education, investment in communal feasts marking life-cycle rituals and graduations from initiation. The way in which healers disposed of, or appeared to dispose of, their income from healing practices served as a basis to judge a particular individual as a healer rather than a witch – a tension which is salient to the institution of the *nganga* who, also, acts as a “witch-finder.” Emmanuel, who flashed his riches by buying a new car and luxury commodities, found himself being accused of dealing with the “head of the crocodile,” *thoho ya ngwena* (a euphemism for witchcraft), and had his car torched by a group of dissatisfied clients. Mulalo, on the other hand, who travelled modestly by taxis, wore the same pair of unassuming trainers (possessing several items of the same type according to the logic of “ostensive poverty”), sponsored graduation rituals of his initiates, *mufheretshedzo*, and a local football team, enjoyed renown for being a “real” *nganga*, *zwa vhukuma*.

As has been shown above, money also carried central significance in the structure of life-histories of the possessed men. Part of the possession “illness” was the experience that while sometimes earning substantial amounts of money, this money was mysteriously dispersing and disappearing from their bank accounts. The men seemed not to be able to hold onto it and reap the benefits of their earnings, even when paid in cash. The ancestors were apparently able to tap into the flows of money and abort them for those whom they had chosen as their mediums to force them to abide by the spirits’ wishes. Significantly, after returning to “Venda” and taking up the profession as *nganga*, the possessed men claimed to have regained control over money flows which became steady and stable. They often specified that all the wealth they had been able to acquire came from income after they have resettled to “Venda” and become healers – it ultimately came from the ancestors. But income from healing practice was not like a salary, they stressed. Only the ancestors knew, and were able to determine, how much there would be at the end of the day. So different character of money was associated with the thoroughgoing transformation of personal identity, mapped onto distinctions of city and country, *tshikuani* and “Venda.” Money itself, the universal means of exchange, has become a means to create particularities and to mark interdependent places and socio-economic units as different and incommensurable. The possessed migrants and healers can be seen as

"experimental practitioners ... they try to make universal signs speak to particular realities" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxii).

Conclusion

The implementation of government policies ensuing from the ideology of African Renaissance in the New South Africa since 1994 has engendered new opportunities in the rural areas for "traditional leaders." "Traditional" chiefs have profited substantial income, power and prestige from the state. Likewise "traditional healers" have been engaged in organising associations and collectives to claim support and funding from the government. Becoming a *nganga* in the rural area has in many respects become a profitable venture, and in "Venda" especially male *nganga* have been busy collaborating with chiefs and headmen to gain authority over populations and access to resources of various kinds. While the possessed men I introduced in this paper have often been engaged in these processes, to explain away spirit possession simply with respect to ulterior motives would be reductive and incorrect. I have tried to show that becoming involved in spirit possession and the *nganga* profession is a complex process through which definitions and practices of gender, power and identity are significantly negotiated, subverted and appropriated in a context in which the possessed male migrants have often limited agency in the face of the power of the spirits and of women.

With respect to the relation of migration, gender and cultural forms in South Africa overwhelming attention has been given to processes through which female labour migrants have appropriated urban performative styles of men and assumed male characteristics (Coplan 1994: 179) or appropriated aspects of womanhood and manhood to forge new "mixed" identities (James 1999: 83). Little is known about male labour migrants "returning" to rural areas and engaging with women-dominated cultural forms like spirit possession. In the case of TshiVenda-speaking male labour migrants I have tried to argue that they, at least to some extent, have become "like women," in terms of techniques of the body, ritual roles and association with the domestic spheres in the rural areas.

The case of "Venda" spirit possession involving male labour migrants has proven significant also in another respect. In late 1980s Comaroff

and Comaroff (1987) predicted that the distinction between “country” and “city” (in their work on the Tswana a distinction corresponding to the categories of *setswana*, “Tswana ways,” and *sekgoa*, “white ways”) would dissipate with the greater socio-economic integration of rural and urban milieus. The salience of the “rhetoric of contrast” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987: 191) of *tshikuani* and “Venda” in spirit possession has proven that these categories have (re-)gained significance for the organisation of identity, agency and practice at least for some groups and categories of people in contemporary South Africa. However, “Venda” in this context is no soothing, primordial rural community. The possessed men make alliances through support groups and networks of initiates, assistants and liegemen who participate in therapeutic processes which clearly delineate some territorial groups from “others” – potential enemies and witches. “Venda” as a “place” in this way dissipates into “Venda” in the plural, retaining coherence only in distinction to *tshikuani*.

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