AIDS, Politics, and Music in South Africa

This book offers an original anthropological approach to the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. Based on more than 15 years' association with the region, it demonstrates why AIDS interventions in the former homeland of Venda have failed – and possibly even been counterproductive. It does so through a series of ethnographic encounters, from kings to condoms, which expose the ways in which biomedical understanding of the virus have been rejected by – and incorporated into – local understandings of health, illness, sex, and death. Through the songs of female initiation, AIDS education, and wandering minstrels, the book argues that music is central to understanding how AIDS interventions operate. It elucidates a hidden world of meaning in which people sing about what they cannot talk about, where educators are blamed for spreading the virus, and in which condoms are often thought to cause AIDS. The policy implications are clear: African worldviews must be taken seriously if AIDS interventions in Africa are to become successful.

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AIDS, Politics, and Music in South Africa

Fraser G. McNeill

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International African Institute, London
For my mum, dad, and sister
and
in loving memory of
Humbulani Nekhavhambe:
1974–2007
Soon we shall experience the death of birth itself if we go on at this rate.

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Preface

After leaving school in 1995, I decided to take a ‘year out’ – that quintessentially Western rite of passage – and ended up teaching English to adults in the Venda region of South Africa. Returning to Venda every year as the guitarist in a popular local reggae band, I found it impossible to escape the deeply held collective sentiment that all was not as it ought to be. South Africa’s newly established democracy was under serious threat from something that most people knew as AIDS, but which no one wanted to talk about. By 2002, the football team for which I played in 1995 had lost almost half of its original squad to AIDS, all young men my age who succumbed to slow, painful, and humiliating deaths shrouded in public secrets and private suspicions.

Returning to Venda as a social anthropologist, I sought to make sense of this situation. Why, despite widespread prevention campaigns, does sexual behaviour remain largely unchanged? Why is there a stigma around condom use? Why is AIDS constructed as a public secret and how does this affect intervention projects? I established as the focus of my study the only people who were willing to talk openly about HIV, and who subsequently became amongst the main protagonists of this book: AIDS peer group educators.

Peer group education is a global phenomenon in the fight against HIV, and it takes various forms in different settings. In Venda, the groups are composed exclusively of young women who sing and dance at weekly public meetings, give out free condoms, and generally promote safer sexual behaviour. But it does not work, and in this book I explain why. In doing so, I take you on a journey from the lofty politics of kingship to the lowly places of gossip and rumour, demonstrating along the way that AIDS peer group education in this remote corner of South Africa is not part of the solution, but rather is part of the problem.

This book is an ethnographic account of AIDS told indirectly through my personal and ongoing sojourn in Venda, and the people that I have met along the way. Contrary to anthropological convention, I have not changed all the names of those whose knowledge I have plundered. My friends in Venda have been subject to my continual interrogations for
more than fifteen years now, and most of them have asked to be identified by name in the text. However, when I do use pseudonyms, I let you know.

Many of the arguments I make in the following pages are either rooted in – or illustrated by – the analysis of songs. If you want to listen to the music you are reading about, songs referred to in the text can be downloaded free of charge from the Cambridge University Press Web site at www.cambridge.org/9781107009912.
I owe a massive thanks to Fiona Nicholson, Fliss Ingham, and Suzi Cook for their friendship, support, hot meals, and accommodation in Thathe Vondo over the last 15 years. Their house has often served as my second home, and I hope one day to repay their kindness. So many people have helped my research in Venda that it is impossible to acknowledge them all, and I apologise to anyone I have missed here. King Kennedy Tshivhase gave my research his blessing, oiling the wheels from the outset. Special thanks are also due to my research assistant and friend, Colbert Mushaaisano Tshivhase. We did not always agree on the interpretation of events, but Colbert had a deep understanding of my anthropological aims and helped take my research in directions I had not considered. Much of what made its way into this book emerged from our late-night debates at Mapita’s Tavern. Regular contributors to this often raucous forum were Mashamba Ligulube Mukwevho, Humbulani Nekhavhambe, Ari-nao Netshilema, Mulingeni Congo Mungeni, Pfene Nemugadi, David Davhidana, and Denga Tshivhase. Also, I have had the privilege of performing, recording, and writing music with Colbert Mukwevho and his brothers Mulalo, Sammy, Buddha, Clement, and Gift. Their creativity and musicianship will always inspire me. Jammin’ in the Burnin’ Shak with Harley, Cornerstone, and Percy was an absolute honour. Solomon Mathase taught me to play guitar Venda style and helped me translate the meaning of his songs. The peer educators allowed me to record and write about their songs, and Noriah Ralinala taught me the music and magic of female initiation. Thanks also to Traugott, Zilke, and Jeannie Fobbe; Zwiakonda Rathogwa; Justice Matshakatini; Rendani Tshautshau Nzinga; Norman Sebe; Abel Neluvhalani; Betty Tshivhase; Mashudu Madache; Florence, Brenda and Mr Chauke; Vho Joe; Godfrey Dederen; Melville Jacobz; Musanda Shandukani Mudzunga; Vendula Rezacova; and Khosi T. N. Makhuya. In Thathe Vondo, my dog Simba proved a trusty and brave companion during the slow process of converting a thesis into a book.

Deborah James often went beyond the call of duty to assist me during my days at the London School of Economics (LSE), and I am very grateful for all the support she has given me. Jean Comaroff and Harry West
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I gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and the Barcapel Foundation.
Abbreviations

Agriven Venda Agricultural Corporation Ltd.
AIC(s) African Independent Church(es): used in singular (AIC) as adjective
ANC African National Congress
ARDC Agric Rural Development Corporation
ARV Antiretroviral
AusAID Australian Agency for International Development
AZT azidothymidine (ARV drug)
BEE Black economic empowerment
BMF–STF Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation–Secure the Future
BONGO Bank-organised NGO
CBI Community-based initiative
CONTRALESA Council of Traditional Leaders of South Africa
COPE Congress of the People
COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
DfID Department for International Development
ELCSA Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa
GEAR Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Strategy
GONGO Government-organised NGO
FAP Forum for AIDS Prevention
FHI Family Health International
HBC Home-based care
HIV/AIDS Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
IKS Indigenous knowledge systems
JOHAP Joint HIV/AIDS programme
KAP Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice
LHR Lawyers for Human Rights
MDM Movement for Democracy
MSF Médecins San Frontières
NAPWA National Association for People Living with AIDS
NDA National Development Agency
NEPAD New Partnership for Africa’s Development
Abbreviations

NGO Non-governmental organisation
NMCF Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund
NPO Non-profit organisation
NUM National Union of Mineworkers
OVC Orphans and vulnerable children
PEPFAR President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
PLWH People Living with HIV and AIDS
PMTCT Prevention of mother-to-child transmission
PPASA Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa
PSG Project Support Group
RDP Reconstruction and Development Programme
SABC South African Broadcasting Corporation
SACISIS South African Civil Society Information Service
SAIRR South African Institute of Race Relations
SANAC South African National AIDS Council
SBP Soutpansberg Petroleum
TAC Treatment Action Campaign
TVBC (states) Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana, and Ciskei
     (apartheid ‘independent homeland states’)
TDT Tshivhase Development Trust
TTA Tshivhase Territorial Authority
TTC Tshivhase Tribal Council
UDF United Democratic Front
USAID United States Agency for International Development
VCT Voluntary counselling and testing
VDC Venda Development Corporation
VIPP Venda Independence People’s Party
VNP Venda National Party
VSO Voluntary Services Overseas (UK)
ZCC Zion Christian Church
Select Glossary of Tshivenda Terms in the Text

*Domba*: The final rites of female initiation, performed after *vhusha*.
*Domba la tshifularo*: *Domba* of the first count.
*Doroboni*: In town.
*Dzekiso*: Name given to the senior wife of a king who will bear the heir to the throne.
*Gota*: Headman, in charge of a specific area under a *khosi*.
*Hogo*: Colloquialism for *murundu*, the male circumcision lodge, in which *hogo* is the main song.
*Inyanga*: Traditional healer (from isiZulu, but used widely in Tshivenda).
*Khondomu*: Condom.
*Khoro*: Weekly public meeting at a chief's kraal.
*Khosikiulu*: Paramount king.
*Khotsi*: Father.
*Losha*: To greet humbly by putting palms of hands together, either seated or kneeling on the ground.
*Mabundu*: Non-alcoholic traditional maize drink.
*Mahafhe*: Alcoholic drink made from fermented maize meal.
*Makhadzi*: Paternal aunt. The king's *makhadzi* plays a special advisory and ritual role.
*Malende*: Songs and dances sung to accompany beer drinking or general festivities.
*Malofha*: Blood.
*Malombo*: Possession dance, rites of affliction.
*Malwadze*: Sickness.
*Malwadze dza vhafumakadzi*: The illnesses of women.
*Mudabe* (plural, *midabe*): Graduates of *vhusha* who instruct younger initiates.
*Muduhulu*: Sister's daughter.
*Mudzimu* (alternatively *Murena*): The Christian God.
*Mufarako* (plural, *mfarakano*): Secret lover.
*Mufhufha*: Venda version of solitaire.
*Mufumakadzi* (plural, *vhafumakadzi*): Woman.
Select Glossary of Tshivenda Terms in the Text

**Mukololo** (plural, *vhakololo*): Royal person.

**Mukoma**: Petty headman. The plural, *Vhakoma*, can be used as an honorific greeting for a *Mukoma*, but *Vhakoma* also refers to the chief’s mother.

**Mulayo** (plural, *milayo*): Laws/rules, usually in reference to that which is associated with initiation schools.

**Mulimo**: Evil poison, as used by a witch.

**Murundu**: Male circumcision lodge.

**Musanda**: The name of the chief or king’s royal courtyard.

**Musevheto**: Early initiation rites for very young girls.

**Mushonga**: Medicine.

**Musiwana** (plural, *vhasiwana*): Commoner.

**Mutu**: Colloquialism for *mushonga*.

**Musiwana** (plural, *vhasiwana*): Commoner.

**Muti**: Evil drug, as used by a witch.

**Mvelele**: Culture.

**Ndumi**: Male adviser to a traditional leader.

**Ngoma**: Drum.

**Ngoma dza vhadzimu**: Alternative term for the *malombo* possession ritual.

**Nnwenda** (plural, *minwenda*): Traditional cloth worn by Venda women, originally made from salempore.

**Shedo** (plural, *mashedo*): Ritual apron worn by female initiates at the *vhusha* and *domba* ceremonies.

**Sialala**: Traditions, of former generations.

**Singo**: Name of the clan who crossed the Limpopo in the late 1600s, conquering *Vhangona* to form ‘the Venda’. *Musingo* means ‘elephant’s trunk’.

**Thabeloni**: Prayer meetings held at sunset every night during the week before a funeral.

**Thechula**: Rites of ancestral sacrifice.

**Thivela**: To prevent.

**Thoethelela**: King.

**Tshefu**: Evil drug, as used by a witch.

**Tshidzumbe** (plural, *zwidzumbe*): Secret.

**Tshifhase**: Adolescent dance.

**Tshigombela**: A dance for women.

**Tshikona**: The Venda national reed dance, performed by men.

**Tshilombe** (plural, *zwilombe*): A male-dominated guitar genre.

**Tshitshambo**: Name given to the ritual hut in which female initiation rites take place.

**Tshivhizizo**: Emergency meeting held by a chief in times of crisis.

**Venda**: Used to refer to the physical locality where Venda people (singular, *Muvenda*; plural, *Vhavenda*) live. The language can be called Tshivenda or Luvenda, but is also referred to as Venda.
Vhadzimu (alternatively Midzimu): Ancestral spirits, no singular.
Vhamusanda (singular and plural): Headman.
Vhatei: Initiates in vhusha or domba.
Vhudsekani: Sexual intercourse.
Vhuhosi: Installation ceremony for a new headman, chief, or king.
Vhusha: Female initiation school attended after the first menses.
Vhutali wa midzimu: Ancestral wisdom.
Vhutungu: Poison from the natural world.
Zwilonda: Pimples/sores.
Zwirendo: Praises.
Map 1. Limpopo Province (incorporating the former homeland of Venda) in South Africa.
Map 2. Boundaries between the main kingdoms in the former homeland of Venda.
Map 3. The Mphephu/Tshivhase border within Limpopo Province.
Map 4. Selected villages referred to in the text.