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.

Fraser G. McNeill is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He was awarded a PhD by the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics in 2007 and received the Audrey Richards Prize from the African Studies Association, UK, in 2008 for his thesis. He is a co-author of the 2009 AIDS Review for the Centre for the Study of AIDS at the University of Pretoria, and he has published articles in African Affairs and South African Music Studies, as well as chapters in several edited volumes.
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AIDS, Politics, and Music in South Africa

Fraser G. McNeill

University of Pretoria, South Africa

International African Institute, London

and

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Fraser G. McNeill
Frontmatter
More Information
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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Maps

1. Limpopo Province (incorporating the former homeland of Venda) in South Africa. \hspace{1cm} page xxii
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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 Mushaisano 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, Arinao Netshilema, Mulingoni Congo Mungoni, 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; Zwaikonda Rathogwa; Justice Matshakatini; Rendani Tshausthau Nzhunga; 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
examined my PhD thesis and provided me with insightful suggestions on how to develop the ideas. I have also benefited from the intellectual rigour imposed by participation in the weekly LSE anthropology seminars. Earlier versions of the arguments made in this book were rehearsed in conversations with Matthew Engelke, Jean La Fontaine, Isak Niehaus, Maurice Bloch, Charles Stafford, Olivia Harris, Michael Scott, Catherine Allerton, Fenella Cannell, Rita Astuti, Laura Bear, Mathijs Pelkmans, Michael Lambek, Girish Daswani, Emily Hitch, Jason Sumich, Maxim Bolt, George St Clair, Hans Steinmuller, Irene Calis, Giovanni Bochi, Casey High, Rory de Wilde, Nicolas Martin, Will Hammonds, Detlev Krige, Ilana van Wyk, Vicky Boydell, Elizabeth A. Hull, and Gwyn Prins. Also, Dave Turkon, Robert Thornton, and Alex Rodlach in the AIDS and Anthropology Research Group read and commented on earlier versions of Chapter 7. Mary Crewe, Jimmy Pieterse, and Johan Maritz at the Centre for the Study of AIDS and John Sharp in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria have helped me think of new directions for the future. In London, Chenjeri Shire ensured that I never forgot Tshivenda. Alistair Fraser compiled the maps. The editorial staff at Cambridge University Press and Stephanie Kitchen at the International African Institute have given me invaluable advice in the politics of publishing a monograph. Later, Mike Kirkwood turned the otherwise forbidding task of working through copyedits into a pleasure.

I gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and the Barcapel Foundation.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>Agriven Venda Agricultural Corporation Ltd.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIC(s) African Independent Church(es): used in singular (AIC) as adjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANC African National Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARDC Agric Rural Development Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARV Antiretroviral</td>
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<td>AusAID Australian Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>AZT azidothymidine (ARV drug)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEE Black economic empowerment</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMF–STF Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation–Secure the Future</td>
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<tr>
<td>BONGO Bank-organised NGO</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBI Community-based initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONTRALESA Council of Traditional Leaders of South Africa</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPE Congress of the People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfID Department for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELCSA Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEAR Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONGO Government-organised NGO</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAP Forum for AIDS Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>FHI Family Health International</td>
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<tr>
<td>HBC Home-based care</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
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<tr>
<td>IKS Indigenous knowledge systems</td>
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<td>JOHAP Joint HIV/AIDS programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>KAP Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>LHR Lawyers for Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDM Movement for Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSF Médecins San Frontières</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAPWA National Association for People Living with AIDS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDA National Development Agency</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NEPAD New Partnership for Africa's Development</td>
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xviii 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.
_Khosi_ (plural, _mahosi_): Chief, 'senior traditional leader'.
_Khosikhulu:_ 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.
_Malofoha:_ 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.
_Mufarakanano_ (plural, _mufarakanano_): Secret lover.
_Mufhufha:_ Venda version of solitaire.
_Mufumakadzi_ (plural, _vhafumakadzi_): Woman.
xx 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.

*Musitwana* (plural, *vhasitwana*): Commoner.

*Muti*: Colloquialism for *mushonga*.

*Mutupo* (plural, *mitupo*): Clan.

*Mvelele*: Culture.

*Ndumi*: Male adviser to a traditional leader.

*Ngoma*: Drum.

*Ngoma dsa vhazimu*: Alternative term for the *malombo* possession ritual.

*Ntwenda* (plural, *vntwenda*): 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.

*Thevhula*: Rites of ancestral sacrifice.

*Thivela*: To prevent.

*Thovhela*: King.

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

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

*Tshifhase*: Adolescent dance.

*Tshigombela*: A dance for women.

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

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

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

*Tshivhidzo*: 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.
Select Glossary of Tshivenda Terms in the Text

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 Mophepu/Tshivhase border within Limpopo Province.
Map 4. Selected villages referred to in the text.