1 Introduction

AIDS, Politics, and Music

AIDS and Music in Venda

The peer educators had already gathered outside the Midway Bottle Store as I climbed out of the mini-bus taxi and headed through the barbed wire gates into the crowd. It was March 2005, late afternoon on a month-end Friday, and the usual mix of recently paid drinkers and thirsty beggars had taken up residence for the evening ahead. Slowly, a group of young women dressed in bright red skirts and smart polo shirts with 'Prevention is Better than Cure' on their backs formed a long line. In single file, each holding onto the performer in front of her in symbolic re-enactment of the famous Venda girls' initiation python dance (*domba*), they forced their way through the crowd towards the main seating area next to the bar. The song that accompanied their intrusion into the men's drinking session had a familiar melody, but it was not from the *domba* repertoire. Instead, it was based on a well-known song from the anti-apartheid days in praise of ANC stalwart Joe '*Ntate*' Modise.[1] The echo of peer educators singing in the sparse drinking arena prompted sporadic tenor and bass accompaniment from groups of men perched on empty beer crates, but the male and female vocal parts struggled to find harmony: the educators had changed the lyrics. Shuffle-stepping towards the bar, they were met with a combination of laughter, feigned shock, anger, and indifference as the audience made out the new words:

Khondomu ndi bosso!	Condom is the boss!
I thivhela malwadze!	It prevents sickness!
Khondomu nga i shume.	Use condoms!
Khondomu ndi bosso!	Condom is the boss!

[1] Joe Modise (1929–2001) played an important role in establishing the military wing of the ANC (*Umkhonto we Sizwe*) and was the South African Minister of Defence from 1994 to 1999.

The term Venda is used throughout in reference to the formerly 'independent' homeland under the apartheid regime. Whilst Venda remains in common usage, the area is now formally known as the Vhembe District of the Thulamela Municipality. Along with the previous homelands of Lebowa and Gazankulu, Venda currently forms part of South Africa's Limpopo Province (see maps).

I took a seat next to some elderly men who seemed bewildered by the scene unfolding before them. Within minutes they made excuses to leave, making their way to the shaded area outside. Several others followed suit, leaving a handful hunched over bottles of beer and cracking jokes under their breath as the peer educators' performance got into full swing. An introductory drama about a drunk man sleeping with an HIV-positive girl before returning home to beat his wife and children proved controversial with the remaining audience: 'You should know, you are the prostitutes!' someone yelled. 'Don't come here with your AIDS story!' shouted another.

Thriving on the hostility, and with almost military precision, the educators assembled into a choir formation. They began to sing more songs and more loudly, encouraging each other to drown out any dissenting voices among the half-drunk hecklers. Turning to shock tactics, thrusting clenched fists filled with packets of condoms into the air, they performed a well-known gospel tune and 'Jesus is number one!' became 'Condom is number one!' Their raised fists imitated the defiant symbol of anti-apartheid activists, and, as the chorus continued, the leader of the song broke ranks to patrol the hall. Now she bellowed from above, directing her attention towards the remaining groups of drinkers: 'AIDS is killing us like the *Boer*[2] used to! You fought apartheid, now fight with us against AIDS!'

This had the desired effect. Faces from outside reappeared to stare through open windows at the educators who, at least briefly, were the centre of attention. A large wooden penis was produced, and they demonstrated to the audience how to safely fit and remove a condom. Unexpectedly, the fake phallus was snatched by a young man who used it as a prop in his own improvised drama – in which, to the hilarious delight of the crowd, he selected a group of educators for an imaginary orgy. One of the elderly men returned from outside to collect his pouch of tobacco. Amid the laughter, I offered him a seat. Refusing politely, he whispered into my ear: 'These things that you see here, they are the illnesses of women (*malwadze dza vhafumakadzi*), they are not our concern.'

The old man's passing comments are a useful place to begin this book. They encapsulate the fault lines along which knowledge of HIV/AIDS has entered the politics of everyday life in the far north-eastern corner of South Africa. In doing so, they allude to the unintended consequences of implementing peer education projects among young women, identified by policy makers as a group at high risk of HIV infection.

[2] *Boer* (literally, farmer) is a Dutch word that is widely used in South Africa to refer to Afrikaans-speaking groups who migrated north from the Cape, away from British colonial control, in the early 1800s. During the anti-apartheid struggle, *Boer* became synonymous with conservative supporters of the Nationalist government.

As a loose demographic cluster, young women in South Africa are indeed more likely to test HIV-positive than any other group.[3] The thrust of the arguments presented in this book, however, challenges the conventional wisdom of 'participatory development' through which such women have assumed the role of AIDS educators. I show in the pages to come the ways in which educators have been framed as vectors of the virus, reinforcing a patriarchal aetiology through which men and older women explain sexually transmitted disease in terms of blood-related taboos and the build-up of pollution in the bodies of certain young women. This has resulted in a paradoxical situation whereby many men are more concerned about *whom* they sleep with, rather than how 'safe' the encounter may be. In this sense, the evidence from Venda presents considerable obstacles to the effectiveness of current approaches to AIDS awareness in the region.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is not necessarily a negative attribute: at least not for the educators. As experts in the bioscientific discourse of the pandemic, they are engaged in attempts to achieve upward social mobility by securing employment in various aspects of public health care. Indeed, a significant proportion of them have obtained some form of employment in government clinics, hospitals, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). One such organisation is the Forum for AIDS Prevention (FAP),[4] an NGO that acts as an umbrella and central administrative body for the 600 or so peer educators in the Venda region. The FAP has a history of securing large government contracts for AIDS-related initiatives such as voluntary counselling and testing, and peer educators, with their well-honed knowledge and experience, stand a strong chance of being employed in these new projects.

Peer education itself, however, is barely remunerated. Volunteers receive a small monthly stipend and only those promoted to the rank of project coordinator collect a more substantial allowance. Nonetheless, in the current context of rising unemployment, where neoliberal restructuring has brought an abrupt decline in migrant remittances and sharp rises in the cost of living, volunteering has become an attractive proposition. In rural post-apartheid South Africa, where much of the population is heavily dependent on government benefits, volunteering is a potential harbinger of sustenance and self-advancement. The educators' desire to change the social and sexual health environment in this part of rural South Africa is thus matched by their aspirations to transcend and move away from the site of their volunteering.

[3] See <http://www.unaids.org/en/Regions_Countries/Regions/SubSaharanAfrica.asp> (accessed 6 February 2007).
[4] A pseudonym.

Singing songs of AIDS thus serves a dual purpose (cf. McNeill and James 2009). It exposes the general public to the safe sex message, fulfilling the obligations of the NGO, whilst touting a fluency in biomedical knowledge of the kind which is valued in the public health sector. Their songs and dances are designed and rehearsed in the settings of 'ongoing training' and 'workshops', organised in collaboration with various donor agencies with the specific aim of refashioning pre-existing songs into contemporary pedagogic aids. The intention is to form a kind of musical 'trap' (Gell 1999). They make simple lyrical and stylistic adjustments with the intention of drawing in the audience, having them sing along, and inducing them to notice the new lyrics. This, in turn, is intended to encourage open discussion about their meaning. The educators, as biomedical experts, are trained to step in at this stage of the performance and furnish the audience with authoritative information about HIV/AIDS, before distributing free condoms.

As part of their daily routine, then, peer educators mine the depths of Venda's rich musical traditions. The prolific musicality of this region was first made famous by John Blacking, whose ethnomusicological account began in the late 1950s and spanned three decades. Blacking emphasised the extent to which musical performance is a marker of life-cycle events. For example, a young woman can only perform the songs and dances of the *vhusha* initiation ceremony, where she is taught how to manage bodily pollution, after her first menses. After a few years, she can 'graduate' into the *domba*, where song lyrics and actions demonstrate the skills required to run a household and satisfy a husband. In a similar fashion, boys pass into manhood through *murundu*, the initiation lodge at which they learn to perform *hogo*. *Hogo* is also part of the male public repertoire, and is often invoked to complete a *tshikona* reed dance or spontaneously at beer drinks by groups of men who were initiated together.[5] Periods of sickness and healing are also marked musically. Rites of affliction (*ngoma dza vhadzimu*) are performed through a ceremony known as *malombo*, during which ancestors are invited to possess those who are sick, and expose the reason for their illness. Various forms of Zionist/Pentecostal musical expressions serve similar, and similarly specific, purposes: to expel demons, perform miracles, and heal the sick.

[5] *Tshikona* is the national Venda reed dance performed by males of all ages. They are grouped by age and social status (royal/commoner) into cohorts, one for each note of the heptatonic scale upon which the genre is based. I learned to play *veve*, one of the smaller pipes towards the end of the phrase. The six reed pipes, *thakula, phala, dangwe, kholomo, veve*, and *nzhingi*, are blown continuously in descending order, punctuated by the leading Kudu horn – *phala* – which starts and ends the phrase, followed directly again by *thakula* ('the lifter') that introduces a new melody. This is accompanied by an anti-clockwise progression of the dancers, who follow the steps of the leader (who can take the *tshikona* in any direction). See Stayt (1931: 320–3) and listen to *tshikona* on the website at http://www.cambridge.org/us/9781107009912.

In Blacking's schema, music is thus an audible and visible sign of social and political groupings, and each genre is symbolically situated in relation to the centre of traditional authority (Blacking 1965: 36–7). The girls' *domba* initiation dance (Blacking 1969a–1969e) and the men's *tshikona*, for example, are both controlled by and performed for chiefs. They display loyalty to specific royal lineages, and as such have taken centre stage in the vibrant political economy of post-apartheid Venda. Following national trends and in response to localised internecine disputes, a revitalisation of chieftainship within the context of the new democratic dispensation has had far-reaching consequences for the performers of these genres and the bodies of knowledge they represent.

The boys' circumcision lodge (*murundu*), on the other hand, is privately owned and subject to a minimal degree of control by rulers. Although a nominal fee is paid to the traditional leaders of the area, and the first night after *murundu* is spent by initiates at the royal kraal, it is substantially less subject to chiefly influence than female initiation. This is evident in terms of spatial location: female initiation takes place at royal homesteads; its successive levels, progressing from marginal outposts of political power to its centre, mirror the chiefly hierarchy of the polity itself. *Murundu*, in comparison, is conducted in a specially made secluded clearing deep in the bush (*thavhani*, literally 'on the mountain' or *hogoni*, after the famous circumcision song, *hogo*). This relative autonomy has been eroded by state institutions but not by those of the chiefship. Since the mid-1930s, government licences have been necessary to hold *murundu*, and representatives from the Department of Health and Welfare regularly inspect proceedings. This has limited the extent to which lodges are conducted in seclusion, and the state has become increasingly concerned about surgical hygiene during circumcision.

Male circumcision was introduced to the region in the early 1800s by Lemba or Sotho groups, whereas female initiation is earlier in origin, dating back to Vhangona occupancy of the Soutpansberg Mountains (see Chapter 2; Stayt 1931: 125–9; van Warmelo 1932: 125). During the Singo migration from north of the Limpopo River into Venda in the late seventeenth century, the invaders incorporated female initiation rites into their structures of government. As *murundu* came much later, possibly from the south, it remained at the periphery of political power. To this day, *murundu* is conducted mostly by Lemba men (Vhashavi): an endogamous clan who – albeit on somewhat dubious grounds – claim ancient Jewish ancestry (cf. Parfitt 2002). As a result of this particular historical development, men who are potentially in line to the succession of royal power in Venda are never circumcised, forging a physical manifestation of distinction between royalty (*Vhakololo*) and commoners (*Vhasiwana*).

Like the peer educators' songs, Blacking's Venda work exposes a duality. He sought to conceptualise the apparent contradiction between music

as a signifier of fixed social positions and equally a source of, and force for, social change. Different genres therefore served disparate functions. He considered some music, such as that from girls' initiation schools and the various musical expressions of Christian hymnody, as conservative in influence, the former reinforcing pre-existing positions in a rigid patriarchal hierarchy and the latter being rooted in the strictures and structures of a missionary past. On the other hand, he saw a potentially transformative quality in the Zionist-style independent African church music (Blacking 1995b), in *tshikona* (Blacking 1973: 51), and in the now extinct *bepha* musical expeditions involving competitive displays by youngsters of rival royal homesteads (Blacking 1962). For Blacking, then, musical performance could cement the hierarchies established through generational, gendered, and royal ties, whilst also being 'an expression of alternative visions of social order . . . [with] . . . an almost heroic capacity to alter the world' (James 2006: 72–4).

Blacking argued that, through these latter musical traditions, and *tshikona* in particular, performers engage in symbolic reconstructions of the social order by establishing harmonious relationships through complex intertwined yet integrated performances. In this way potential and actual enemies may be brought together through a state of being he called 'virtual time', bringing 'peace to the countryside' (Blacking 1973: 51) in the vested interests of chiefs and their subjects. This belief in the capacity of music to alter the world advantageously led Blacking to draw an analogy between 'humanly organised sound' and the realisation of 'soundly organised humanity' (Blacking 1973: 95): an insight which has proved productive for subsequent studies of musical traditions in Southern Africa (James 2006).[6]

This tension between music's ambiguous qualities is apparent in peer educators' songs. They reaffirm the volunteers' status as young women in an unyielding patriarchal structure, whilst simultaneously incorporating the revolutionary spirit of the anti-apartheid movement, via musical form, into AIDS education. In more practical terms, their performances create the possibility of material benefits, of earning a fixed income and achieving upward social mobility. Thus, the analysis of peer education music points to the shortcomings of categorising specific genres as having an 'either/or' effect. AIDS educators in Venda, like countless other performers throughout the world, weave local elements into songs and dances that hold more national and international significance. They blur the boundaries between, and perhaps even create new genres, through the syncretic and strategic blending of various musical traditions to harness the particular zeitgeist of their post-apartheid experience.

[6] See, for example, Coplan (1994), Erlmann (1991; 1996), James (1999), and Muller (1999).

Their songs represent a creative rearrangement of existing repertoires. As young women, however, the composers/performers of these songs have limited options. Again this points to their position in a gendered stratification of social status. Their alternatives include *malende* (beer drinking/celebratory songs), certain public aspects of female initiation (from the three consecutive stages of *musivheto*, *vhusha*, and *domba*), *tshigombela* (a widely performed but exclusively female genre with a particular form and technique), missionary and Zionist/Pentecostal-style church music, and a variety of non-gender-specific popular music such as songs of the struggle or singles from local and national charts. Music performed exclusively by men, such as that from the *tshikona* reed dance, songs from *murundu*, and *tshilombe* guitar music, fall outside of their potential repertoire. A *domba* girls' initiation dance can thus be fused with a popular anti-apartheid melody, and that melody can be laced with lyrics declaring AIDS as the new apartheid, or condoms as the second coming of Jesus Christ. Through this *bricolage*, peer educators seek to present 'the illnesses of women' as the illnesses of the nation, and the performers are at once fixed into the social structure, and potentially liberated from it, through performance.

However, the biomedical knowledge dispensed by peer educators is in play with competing – but not necessarily incommensurable – ideas about what AIDS is, where it came from, and how to prevent it. In these, scientific explanations have had to contend with a robust, but flexible, body of ritual knowledge. This knowledge, like the biomedicine touted by the peer educators, is explicitly concerned with the maintenance of healthy sexual and social reproduction. However the modes of transferring the two bodies of knowledge rely on very different social settings. Ancestral knowledge is transferred from ritual elders to initiates through the songs and dances of initiation ceremonies in ritual contexts that have flourished under recent processes of 'retraditionalisation'. In seeking to transfer this knowledge, ritual elders and traditional leaders act not only to gain a sense of control over the initiates, but to quell the consequences of a widely perceived 'crisis' through which they blame the erosion of generational/ancestral respect for the unprecedented recent increase in deaths (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2004). This book explores the relationship between these two bodies of scientific and ancestral knowledge against the backdrop of socio-cultural divisions of gender and generation through which people in Venda make sense of AIDS in their everyday lives.

Post-Apartheid Venda: Africa's Eden?

Depending on the time of year, the landscape within which this medley of song and dance takes place varies dramatically. After the variable summer rain from December to February, the countryside near the Soutpansberg

mountain range, around which much of Venda is clustered, transforms into a vibrant hilly collage of deep greens and rich, reddish browns. If the rain has been favourable, rivers cut through the countryside, filling the lakes and dams. Villages of varying size and stature pepper the mountainsides, each falling under the control of a particular chief (*Khosi*, plural *Mahosi*) who, in turn, answers to the superior structures of regional traditional authorities – who answer, ultimately, to their employers in the provincial government's Office of the Premier.

To the far north and east, smaller and more sporadic villages mark the edges of the Soutpansberg. On this periphery, the deep greens fade into a dryer, dusty brown savannah that drops down towards the Indian Ocean via the former homeland of Gazankulu, the Kruger National Park, and on to Mozambique. To the north, Venda stretches towards the border towns of Musina and Beitbridge, across the Limpopo River, and into Zimbabwe (see maps).

A driver approaching Venda from the south along the highway from Johannesburg is greeted by large roadside billboards that entice him with promises of what lies ahead. From the outskirts of Pretoria they read: 'Limpopo: a Different World, Only Hours Away!', 'Venda, Experience the Land of Legend', 'The Road to the REAL Africa' until, eventually, on arrival, a sign proclaims 'Welcome to Africa's Eden!' On the huge posters, pictures of a *domba* initiation dance fade into picturesque snapshots of village life with earthenware pottery. Sparkling waterfalls feed the ancient, sacred Lake Fundudzi. Superimposed on this idyllic scene, artistic impressions of wildlife allude to a border with the Kruger National Park, another untouched corner of Africa. The driver might imagine himself as journeying into the past, to a forgotten, mystical land where humans live in harmony with nature and time stands still.

By marketing the Limpopo Province, and specifically the Venda region, as 'Africa's Eden', post-apartheid tourism bosses have drawn on a widely held stereotype. Tshivenda-speaking people (Vhavenda; singular, Muvenda) have long been portrayed as mysterious, insular, and culturally unique among South African ethnic groups. Several overlapping factors have contributed to this portrayal of a Venda ethnic identity. Geographically, the region is remote, nestling – as we have heard – at the foot of the Soutpansberg in the extreme north-east of the country. This peripheral location has led to a 'myth of Venda isolation' (Ralushai 1977) and of Venda resistance to outside influence. A well-known anecdote seems to prove this. During the so-called *Mfecane* in the nineteenth century, Shaka's regiments are said to have been unable to penetrate the inhospitable terrain or conquer the cunning Venda warriors, who hid in high mountain gullies and crushed the approaching Zulu aggressors by rolling large boulders down into their path.

The stereotypical representation of Venda as a remote and mystical hinterland is exacerbated by demographic and linguistic factors. Constituting just over one million people, only 2.3 per cent of the total South African population (Statistics South Africa 2003), Vhavenda are second only to amaNdebele as the country's smallest ethnic group. Unlike the siNdebele, isiZulu or isiXhosa languages, however, Tshivenda is not of Nguni origin, but is from 'the north' (*vhukaranga*) and has more affinity with the vast Niger-Congo linguistic cluster that includes Shona in Zimbabwe and Lozi in Zambia. For this reason, Tshivenda is not easily understood by Zulu or Xhosa speakers, and Vhavenda people in Johannesburg are often mistakenly referred to as *Makwerekwere* (foreigners).[7] Moreover, although many Vhavenda were recruited to become migrant labourers in the gold mines on the Rand and diamond mines near Pretoria, they often disguised their true ethnicity, for fear of minority victimisation, by speaking only in isiZulu at the workplace and in labour compounds. For this reason, they were largely excluded from studies of the South African migrant work force of the time (cf. Moodie 1994 or McNamara 1980).

The small group that originated in a place of distant mountains and who seemed to speak in a foreign tongue yet could blend into the cityscape were, and still are, treated with suspicion and renowned for their supposedly secretive character. This gave rise, inter alia, to the notion that Vhavenda are mythical masters of the occult who possess an extraordinary ability to invoke witchcraft: a conviction that has been reinforced by the perceived proliferation of witch killings and perpetual allegations of medicine murder (colloquially, '*muti* murder') in the area. Between 1985 and 1995, an estimated 389 alleged witches were murdered in the (then) Northern Province (Niehaus 2001a: 188; Ralushai et al. 1996). Sociological explanation of this episode has presented it partly in terms of young, male ANC Youth League 'comrades' reacting against the political authorities and traditional leaders who supported and often became office holders in the Bantustan governments.

Framing Venda as a part of Africa's Eden seems inappropriate in this macabre context. And yet in another sense the government's advertising strategy is an accurate depiction of bountiful fruitfulness: the omnipresent agricultural industry that is the cornerstone of Limpopo's economic contribution to the country.[8] Whilst most commercial-scale farming is to be

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

[8] The most recent statistics available are from Statistics South Africa (2001). In early 2009, data from the 2006 census for Limpopo Province were as yet unavailable. In 2001, 'Agricultural related work' was second only to 'Community services' as the most common form of employment in Vhembe District.

found on farms that were part of the old 'white South Africa', there is also remarkably fertile land to be found within the borders of the previous homeland. This takes the form of bright red soil that nurtures in virtually every Venda homestead a selection of avocado, maize, mango, banana, orange, cherry, lemon, and pawpaw trees, the fruits of which are either consumed by the family or sold at roadside markets. However, private or community-run orchards in which the main subsistence crop of maize could be cultivated for the production of surplus have become less common in recent years. Through a combination of atypical drought, flash floods, and inadequate access to microfinance, and despite state-sponsored initiatives to reverse the trend, most communal farming projects in Venda have collapsed. This has left families reliant on commercially produced maize which, like all foodstuffs in recent years, has been subject to significant increases in retail price.

Despite Venda's potential for natural abundance, then, daily life in the region is characterised by socio-economic hardship and political trends broadly similar to those found in other parts of rural South Africa (cf., for example, Oomen 2005 in Sekhukhuneland; Ngwane 2004 in Transkei; White 2004 in KwaZulu-Natal). Recent government attempts to provide basic services such as water and electricity have been implemented very slowly, and supplies remain infrequent and unreliable. According to the most recently available government statistics, over 70 per cent of households in the Venda region still cook on wood fires, and fewer than 3 per cent have a water tap in the house (Statistics South Africa 2001). The burden of providing fuel and water is borne by women and children, who have little option but to make daily trips to collect them. With few exceptions, roads and the mini-bus taxis that traverse them are in various stages of disrepair. Opportunities for employment are scarce, with both personal and household incomes suffering as a result.

School leavers generally aspire to work 'in town' (*doroboni*), with destinations such as Polokwane, Pretoria, or Johannesburg in mind, while some even seek work abroad (*seli ha lwange* ['across the sea']). This small minority, mostly children of wealthy families, have achieved employment in Europe (mostly the United Kingdom) and North America, where they accumulate savings in foreign currencies before their visas expire and they are forced to return. As part of the 'internet generation', this young elite group of savvy Vhavenda use the worldwide web to maintain communication with each other and with those 'at home' who can access the internet – often through mobile phones. Whilst they and their families enjoy the economic and social benefits that come with upward mobility, their life experience marks them apart from the majority of young school leavers in Venda. For this latter group, rising unemployment has led to a dramatic decrease in successful attempts to find work of any kind, and an increase of suspicious envy towards those who do.