

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

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University of Pretoria, South Africa

International African Institute, London
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-107-00991-2 — AIDS, Politics, and Music in South Africa
 Fraser G. McNeill
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107009912

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First published 2011

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

McNeill, Fraser G., 1977–

AIDS, politics, and music in South Africa / Fraser G. McNeill.

p. ; cm. – (International African library ; no. 42)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00991-2 (hardback)

1. HIV infections – Prevention – South Africa. 2. HIV infections – Social aspects – South Africa. 3. Music – South Africa. I. Title. II. Series: International African library ; no. 42.

[DNLM: 1. HIV Infections – prevention & control – South Africa.

2. Anthropology, Cultural – South Africa. 3. Health Knowledge, Attitudes, Practice – South Africa. 4. Music – South Africa. WC 503.6]

RA643.86.S6M386 2011

362.196'97920096–dc22 2011001950

ISBN 978-1-107-00991-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-41756-4 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at
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*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.

Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (1995)

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Maps

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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

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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.

Acknowledgements

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, Ari-nao Netshilema, Mulingoni Congo Mungoni, Pfone 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 Nzginga; Norman Sebe; Abel Neluvhalani; Betty Tshivhase; Mashudu Madache; Florence, Brenda and Mr Chauke; Who 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

xvi Acknowledgements

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

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

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
SACSIS	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.
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.
Mufarakano (plural, *mafarakano*): 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.
- Musiwana* (plural, *vasiwana*): Commoner.
- Muti*: Colloquialism for *mushonga*.
- Mutupo* (plural, *mitupo*): Clan.
- Mvelele*: Culture.
- Ndumi*: Male adviser to a traditional leader.
- Ngoma*: Drum.
- Ngoma dza vhadzimu*: Alternative term for the *malombo* possession ritual.
- Nwenda* (plural, *minwenda*): Traditional cloth worn by Venda women, originally made from salem pore.
- 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.
- Tshidzombe* (plural, *zwidzombe*): Secret.
- Tshifhase*: Adolescent dance.
- Tshigombela*: A dance for women.
- Tshikona*: The Venda national reed dance, performed by men.
- Tshilombe* (plural, *zvilombe*): 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.

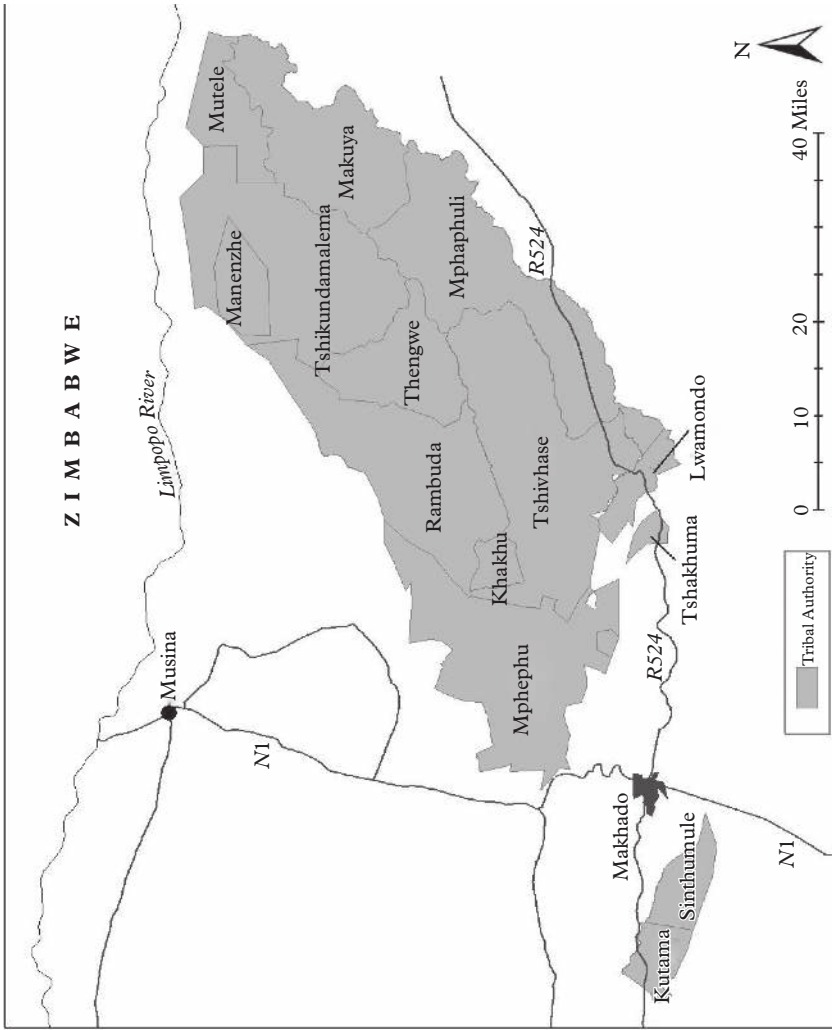
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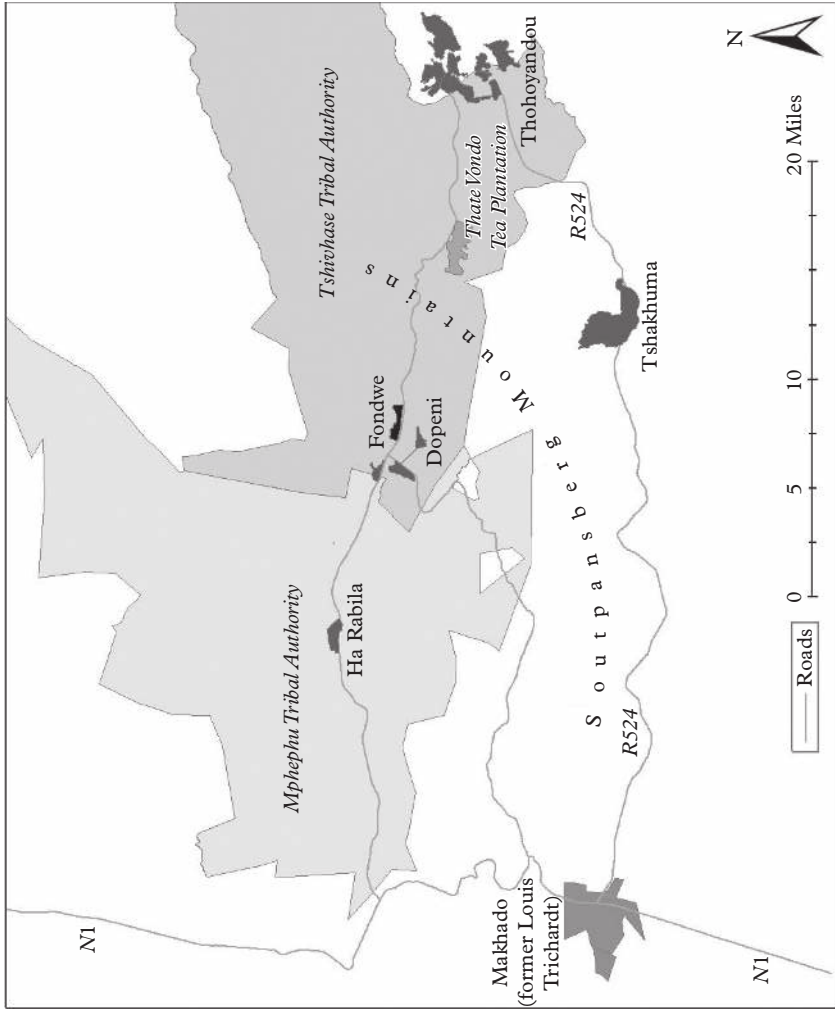
- Vhadzimu* (alternatively *Midzimu*): Ancestral spirits, no singular.
Vhamusanda (singular and plural): Headman.
Vhatei: Initiates in *vhusha* or *domba*.
Vhudsekani: Sexual intercourse.
Vhuhosi: Installation ceremony for a new headman, chief, or king.
Vhusha: Female initiation school attended after the first menses.
Vhutali wa midzimu: Ancestral wisdom.
Vhutungu: Poison from the natural world.
Zwilonda: Pimples/sores.
Zwirendo: Praises.



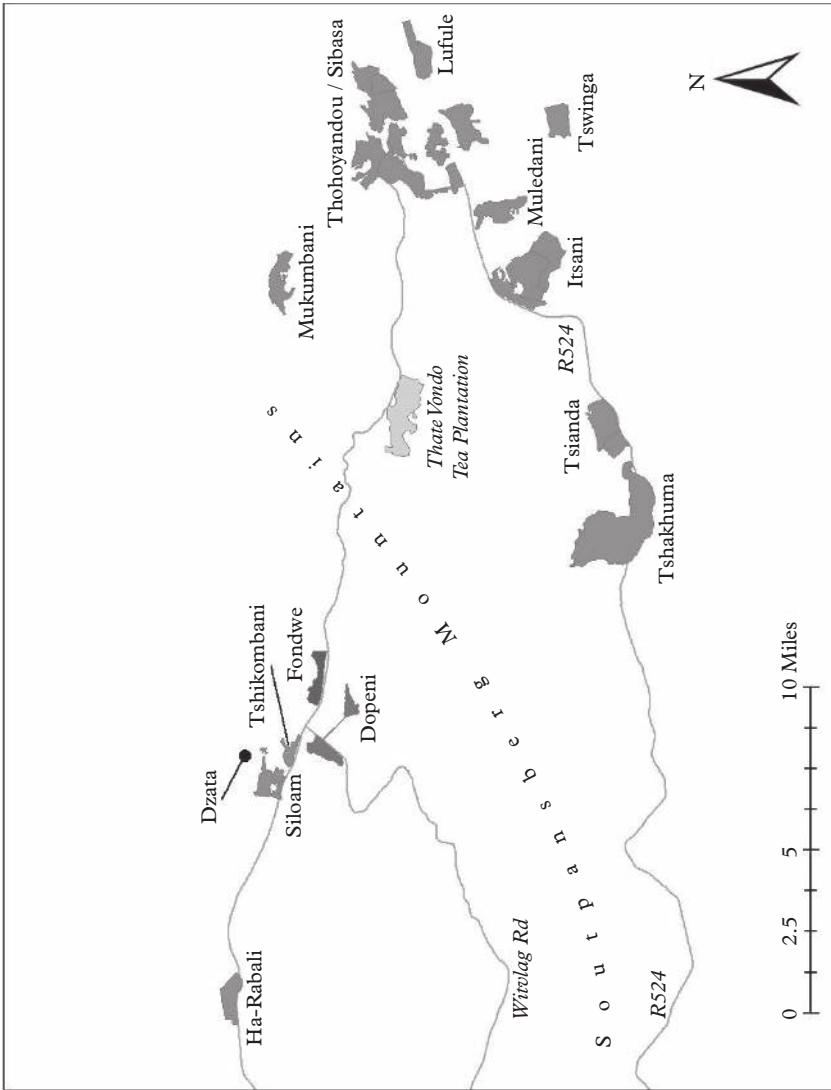
Map 1. Limpopo Province (incorporating the former homeland of Venda) in South Africa.



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.