

Conflict Mediation and *Bungoma* Activism in a South African Township

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Abstract

The following article draws on fieldwork with traditional African healers in an urban South African township and examines mediation sessions undertaken by a group of healers with a view to contemporary conflicts that emerged during their praxis. I argue that the healers' mediation practices are a form of activism that addresses the hermeneutical and institutional gap between traditional healing and the magistrates' court system. This activism further presents a social positioning by healers for greater legitimacy, recognition, and integration with governmental structures. The article introduces the township of Alexandra and two different conflict resolution pathways that exist there, which reflect two divergent judicial moralities of reproduction with their respective cultural frameworks. The article then provides an overview of the institution of traditional healing and, lastly, describes the healers' mediation as a form of activism.

Keywords

activism – traditional healers – *bungoma* – South Africa – conflict resolution

1 Introduction

On an April morning in the township of Alexandra in 2017, I met with my primary interlocutor Gogo Thambo Lenyoka, a traditional African healer¹ (*sangoma*), to join fellow healers in front of the local magistrates' court. A bail hearing had been set for a young man charged with the rape and murder of a

two-year-old girl. The Agisaneng Domestic Abuse & Training (ADAPT) office had called on members from allied groups, which included traditional healing organisations, to come and protest. They held up signs that read: 'No bail for the murderer', 'Justice delayed is justice denied', 'Stop child murder!!', 'Our children. Our future. Stop killing them', 'You kill a woman, you kill a nation', 'Tougher and stiffer sentences for rapists!!', 'Violence against children must stop', and 'You hurt a child, you hurt the nation'.

After the protest we left the court and walked to the Multi-Purpose Centre. The Parliamentary Constituency Office (PCO) had agreed that a group of traditional African and faith healers (the 'Forum') could use their boardroom. Upon entering we were greeted with the usual '*Thokoza*' and two resounding claps from several healers who were already seated around a table. After a few more healers arrived, a total of eight were present in the boardroom. This particular group of healers had gathered to mediate two cases. The first involved a young woman, a *sangoma*, who was engaged in a dispute with her mother and aunt. The second concerned a middle-aged woman who was training to become a *sangoma*, but felt she was being exploited for money and labour instead of receiving the appropriate training. At the end of the day, I was struck by the healers' two modes of engaging with justice and social change. On the one hand, the healers were concerned with the activities in the magistrates' court; on the other hand, they were involved with emergent issues within their own praxis. This article considers these modes of engagement as forms of activism.

The working definition of activism for this special edition is understood as a 'social practice and enacted form of societal agency that is articulated with a view to communal imaginaries, visions and hopes towards a better life and/or against some (perceived) injustice, domination or adverse social development' (van Dijk, Kirsch, and dos Santos, present issue). This working definition of activism can also be applied to religion as a domain of life where models of the world (as it is) and models for the world (as it should be) are brought together in a complementary fashion (Geertz 1973; Lambek 2015; Luhrmann 2015). Michael Lambek (2012) further describes activism in terms of a tension between tradition and reform. The former appeals to an authority and its continuation as something good, which are presented in the form of propositions such as 'It is right to do so as our parents and grandparents did' or 'What our parents and grandparents did is right and good' (Lambek 2012, 351). By contrast, the latter locates the good in questioning the former and seeking to correct what are perceived to be mistakes of the past ('It is right and good to question authority, to improve, to correct past mistakes'; Ibid.). In either case, tradition or reform, a sense of the good or what is right is implicated within

activist practice (Lambek 2010). In other words, notions of good and right are at the crux of tensions in presenting a model for the world and the ways to achieve or sustain such a model in response to a model of the world as it is experienced.²

In addition, the thematically overlapping anthropological debates about activism, religion, and the good can be situated within the literature on morality³ and its distinction between reproduction⁴ and freedom.⁵ Indeed, as noted in the working definition above, any activism predicated on a sense of the good is articulated 'towards a better life and/or against some (perceived) injustice, domination or adverse social development'. The activists' concern thereby relates to systemic and institutional forms of injustice. That is, activists are critically engaged with a 'morality of reproduction' constituted by a 'kind of moral action that reproduces already existing patterns of behaviour' (Robbins 2012, 118), which cultivates a bias toward certain groups of people or institutions. In the sequence of events described above, the healers' enacted forms of societal agency first expressed concern for the good by way of participating in solidarity with Agisaneng Domestic Abuse & Training (hereafter ADAPT) against violence against women and children. Afterward they addressed conflicts emanating from the *Bungoma* tradition, its contemporary praxis, and lived experiences within the township. The two forms of activism present a contrast in modes of engagement and social identities between an activism of citizens in solidarity leaning on a government judicial system to reach the 'right' verdict on the one hand, and an activism driven by healers regulating themselves and addressing their own concerns on the other.

This article focuses primarily on the healer-driven activism in the Alexandra township based on evidence obtained during fieldwork—through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes—from February 2017 to October 2018. My primary interlocutors were healers in the Forum. Additional data was obtained from other healers, laypersons, and government officials in Alexandra. The activism discussed in this article is not always visible or well known within the township. However, the healers' engagement with concerns that emerge from within their praxis and concerns that emerge externally in relation to their praxis illustrates an activism that addresses two interrelated issues. The first pertains to the hermeneutical gap between the Bungoma praxis and the magistrates' system. The second pertains to the institutional gap between the lived experiences of Bungoma and available conflict resolution mechanisms, i.e., access to justice. In other words, the healers' activism is engaged with addressing internal concerns with regard to Bungoma and external concerns of institutional relations.⁶ Moreover, the overarching aim

of this activism is to better integrate healers with official government structures in the city of Johannesburg, not to be dictated and controlled by government but to be granted a platform of legitimacy and recognition beyond lip service. In this sense, the healers' activism in conducting mediations is aimed at achieving a better life for the institution of traditional healing internally, and within the greater urban context.

Given the religious landscape of South Africa in which approximately 78 percent of South Africans nominally identify as Christians (Stats SA 2016), and the discussion of Christian activism in this special issue, I would like to briefly touch on the issue of Christianity within the context of healers in Alexandra prior to proceeding. The healers discussed in this article all identify as both a traditional healer and a Christian. A few of them identify as 'double-barrels', a colloquial term that refers to those who are both a traditional and a faith healer (*sangoma* and *mporofiti*). Indeed, the Forum's monthly meetings, apart from their mediation sessions, often begin and end with prayer. However, their identification with Christianity does not entail that they are uncontroversial. Healers are received with mixed responses in the township (described further below). The identification as both Christian and healer further indicates an influence of Christianity on the Bungoma tradition and its praxis. Such hybridisations make it difficult to discern whether an aspect of their praxis or an emphasis on a certain value is particularly owed to a Christian influence. During their mediation sessions there was little explicit Christian discourse and much more focus on propriety within the Bungoma praxis. That is, the religious content of their mediations was much more explicit about Bungoma, and the issues contained therein (including accusations of witchcraft), than Christianity. As one of my interlocutors stated, 'We are trying to restore our dignity' as healers. In this regard, although there is a nominal identification with Christianity, the healers' activism retains an internal orientation that pertains to the Bungoma institution and collective change within their praxis as well as an external orientation regarding how they are perceived.

The article⁷ begins by introducing the township of Alexandra and two different conflict resolution pathways that perpetuate distinct moralities of reproduction through their respective frameworks and cultural logics: the magistrates' system and Bungoma. It then provides a brief overview of traditional healing, which also serves as a platform to illustrate how the Bungoma praxis and its contemporary concerns are different from but not entirely unrelated to issues dealt with in the magistrates' system. Lastly, I discuss case studies of the healers' mediations relating to Bungoma as a form of activism that not only deals with issues that emerge from the everyday lived experiences of Bungoma but also as a means for positioning this institution in the wider social field.

2 Conflict Resolution Pathways in Alexandra

The Johannesburg township of Alexandra (also known as 'Alex') was founded in 1912 and spans 6.9 km². According to the 2011 South Africa census, Alexandra retains a dominantly black population of approximately 180,000. However, in 2001, the World Bank estimated the population as 750,000. In either case, the density of Alex cannot be overstated. The World Bank (2001) further notes that the township's infrastructure was designed for a population of 70,000 and that

Its original stands of size of 500–600 sqm are characterized by sizeable houses of reasonable stock but usually with 3–6 additional separate rooms built in the original gardens, each usually housing an additional family who [may] rent from the main householder. The additional rental units, which provide a significant income to the main householder, are termed 'backyard shacks' although many are of brick or block construction of reasonable quality. There are an estimated 20,000 shacks of which approximately 7,000 are located in 'backyards.'

WORLD BANK 2001

The population of Alex and the number of shacks has undoubtedly increased since the report was produced. Moreover, crime continues to be a significant issue in Alex due to its population density and the sustained income inequality that 'rendered the black majority abjectly poor during apartheid [which] remains among the highest in the world' (Teppo 2011, 225; citing Seekings and Nattrass 2005).⁸ According to Crime Stats SA, in 2018, Alexandra had 90 murders and 191 sexual offences. By contrast, the neighbouring suburb of Sandton had 15 murders and 59 sexual offences.⁹ According to the Child Gauge Survey, 'in 2016, a national prevalence study estimated that one in three children [in South Africa] are victims of sexual violence and physical abuse before they reach the age of 18 years, whilst 12% of children report neglect and 16% report emotional abuse' (Jamieson, Berry, and Lake 2017, 91).

Many of the healers in Alex became acquainted with the ADAPT initiative, mentioned above, when they were invited to a programme that discussed counselling in traditional healing for domestic abuse and violence against women. This programme was intended to be complementary rather than in opposition to the healers' approaches. The aim was to build alliances and work together on issues of gender-based violence and domestic abuse. Since then, many have joined ADAPT's list of stakeholders participating in workshops, meetings, and protests held by the organisation. For instance, several healers

invited me to join them at a public meeting organised by ADAPT during which the organisation presented preliminary research about child protection, bullying, and sexual violence in Alexandra high schools. Although the healers unmistakably represent themselves as practitioners of Bungoma, they also attend these meetings as concerned residents and citizens¹⁰ of Alex regarding issues of moral and ethical behaviour in the township.

Official crime statistics only present a partial picture. There are countless injustices, disputes, and conflicts that go unreported and unaccounted for. Not only do such unreported injustices include cases of domestic violence in which a survivor may recant a police report out of fear of losing the household's primary breadwinner to undesirable consequences such as imprisonment (also see Bae et al. 2018 on a community court in Namibia), but also to various disputes from within the Bungoma healing tradition, its contemporary praxis, and lived experiences. For instance, in the first mediation case mentioned above the two elders in the dispute (the mother and the aunt), stated that the young woman (a sangoma) had been disrespectful to them. One example the elders provided was that the young healer would invite friends to sleep at the house without permission. The young healer made a counterclaim that the aunt had disturbed her space of healing practice (*indumba*), which is usually a designated place within a house or a separate hut. I was told that one should not disturb such a space. Taken all the claims together, this case presented a dilemma of respect: a respect for one's elders and family members versus a respect for traditional healing practices and sacred spaces. During the mediation session the healers of the Forum emphasised both, but chastised the young healer since they deemed moral discipline to be a component of any healer's training. The mediation court recommended the family hold a meeting to consider the Forum's recommendations and discuss the issues further.

The second case was brought by a middle-aged woman who was a student (*thwasa*) learning to become a sangoma. She claimed that she had been training with her teacher (*gobela*) for roughly two and a half years, a training that, according to my interlocutors, normally does not last longer than six months. The student had already spent a considerable amount of money on her training, yet instead of being allowed to focus on the process of becoming a healer, her *gobela* expected her to do all the household chores and much of the other work around the *gobela*'s home. After the mediation process was completed, the *thwasa* was released from the verbal contract and training with her *gobela*. She eventually found a new *gobela* who could provide her with the proper training. I was informed later on during my fieldwork that she completed her training a few months thereafter. During the mediation session, the healers of the Forum expressed concerns that those who were unfamiliar with traditional African

healing and the training process, but had received a ‘calling’ (*ubizo*) from their ancestors, were often susceptible to exploitation. The two cases emerge from lived experiences within the Bungoma tradition. Not only do they go unreported in crime statistics but also illustrate a mediation of colliding values. The first highlights the value of respect; a respect towards one’s elders and a respect for sacred spaces. The second notes the tension between making money and the responsibilities of providing services as a gobela. Moreover, the cases illustrate nuances that lead complainants—those who are involved in or adjacent to the Bungoma praxis—to bring their concerns to a group of healers (Forum) to assist in mediating the conflict rather than adjudication from the local magistrates’ court. I discuss some of the reasons for this below.

The two forms of conflict resolution and justice-seeking pathways discussed thus far—one leaning on the magistrates’ court through protest and another providing mediation services within the township—are exemplary of two different moralities of judicial reproduction. Before exploring the healers’ mediation practice in more detail and noting some of the cultural logics—in terminologies, hermeneutics, and heuristics—that differ from the magistrate’s morality of judicial reproduction, the following section briefly discusses the status quo and social role of traditional healing in South Africa as well as some of the reasons for why healers are seeking to draw on their own morality of reproduction separate from the dominant, or publicly recognised, health and judicial institutions of the state.

3 The Social Role of Traditional Healers

According to the chairperson of the healers’ Forum, in 2016 there were approximately 300 to 500 traditional and faith healers in Alex. Across South Africa’s contemporary landscape, an often-quoted statistic reports that an estimated 80 percent of black South Africans frequent traditional African healers (Mbatha et al. 2012; Burchardt 2017 citing Decoteau 2013). This statistic, which has been disputed (Nxumalo et al 2011) but also unofficially confirmed (Thornton 2017), indicates that healers play a significant role for black South Africans when their well-being, health, and issues of justice are concerned. In these areas of social life many South Africans engage with both formal and informal institutions of healing and justice. The ubiquity and engagement with traditional healing practices further notes the paradox of a ‘minoritarian majority’: ‘a majority by numbers since the majority of Africans expressly support indigenous spiritual traditions, including belief in witchcraft and the need for protection against it [Comaroff and Comaroff 2004], but minority understood as a “product

of particular ideological, social, political and economic processes [Cowan 2001, 156]” (Burchardt 2017, 271-272). This paradox is also indicative of problems concerning the accessibility, resources (namely issues of affordability and availability), and efficacy of treatment and healing as well as different ideas about the cultural logics of ailing and suffering, i.e., issues of cultural acceptability. There are many cases in Alex when a person goes to a clinic, waits for the whole day without seeing a nurse or doctor, returns the next day, and then treated for an ailment. However, the treatment may not provide relief so s/he will go to a traditional healer (or vice versa). In other cases, a patient may interpret his/her physical ailments in light of a recurring dream or circumstances within the family, which the health practitioner at the clinic dismisses (see Carel and Kidd 2017 on epistemic injustice in medicine and healthcare) but a healer acknowledges (Van Binsbergen 1991; also see Janzen 1995 on the technical vocabulary of the *ngoma* tradition as a ‘misfortune managing institution’).

In an attempt to bridge this gap, in 2004 the healers were the primary subject of concern in the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (THP Act; see Government Gazette 2005 and South Africa Government 2007). Policymakers ‘presented [the THP Act] as a project of the recognition of cultural diversity, [but it] was also inspired by the desire to regulate and control healers and protect people against “fake” healers and harmful practices’ (Burchardt 2017, 277). However, the THP Act is still not implemented to date. In spring 2019 the Traditional Healers Organisation gathered members to march and protest to ‘end medical apartheid’. In autumn of that same year, according to one of my interlocutors in Alex, the Traditional Health Organisation called a meeting to address its concerns relating to the amended 2007 THP Act and to make additional recommendations to the government. A report from this meeting has yet to be produced. When I read the legislation, I found many incongruities between the Act and the contemporary practices of healers on the ground in Alex. While the specific discrepancies and cultural politics represented in the THP Act is beyond the scope of the present paper, the existence of this Act affirms that the common understanding of healers is through the lens of South Africa’s biomedical healthcare system and further complicated by discussions within the judicial sphere about religion, culture, and tradition (Burchardt 2017; see also Chidester 1996).

The work of traditional healers draws on an operative understanding of well-being that goes beyond the conventional paradigm of biological health (Van Binsbergen 1991; Janzen 1992, 1995; Thornton 2017). In addition to addressing physical ailments, which tend to be associated with ancestral spirits, they also ‘offer a wide range of counselling, divination/diagnostic’ services that address ‘anxiety and depression’ (Thornton 2009, 17; see also Reis 2000 for

discourse in Swazi healing on suffering and recovery). Furthermore, healers provide consultations for one's personal and professional life as well as protective services from 'motor accidents, theft, witchcraft, infection, unemployment and loss of love, lovers or spouses' as well as consultations for 'lost or stolen objects' and persons (Thornton 2009, 17). Beyond individual consultations and enhancements, healers are involved in the community through their engagements with youth and educational issues, domestic abuse, violence, and crime, as well as interfaith gatherings and mobilisations. In this regard, healers are involving themselves in various aspects of social life concerned with individual and communal well-being, which is tacitly predicated on the idea of a contract that people have with one another, also known as 'connective' or 'relational' justice (Wielenga 2018, 6; citing Graneß 2017; see also Thornton 2017). For the above reasons, the healers and their patients/clients operate with reference to a morality of reproduction that differs from the morality of reproduction pursued in formal government institutions and structures. This is not to say that healers do not refer¹¹ their patients to health clinics—indeed, the healers themselves go to clinics for some of their own ailments—or the magistrate courts nor is it to say that the issues involved within the Bungoma praxis are entirely unrelated to government institutions but to highlight different forms of understanding the issues.

However, the status of sangoma is far from uncontroversial in the township. While healers practically 'remain outside the [daily] experience of many South Africans', they are nevertheless 'fully part of South African life and consciousness' (Thornton 2009, 17). During my fieldwork I asked several individuals what they thought about sangomas. Their reactions were mixed. Some praised them and stated that 'we wouldn't be here if it weren't for healers', while others gave a mixed response by saying that they were aware of them and appreciated their cultural value but were ambivalent about actually visiting one. Some specifically denounced traditional healers in the Gauteng province because, according to them, the healers were crooks. Yet others denounced healers altogether, followed by a declaration of their Christian identity. For example, when I asked why a taxi driver had not been to a traditional healer, he told me, 'I do not need the ancestors! I only need Jesus and my pastor to protect me!' He then proceeded to tell me about his car, emphasising that it was in good condition, all of which he took as evidence of the blessings and protection he received from his church. In another instance, responding to the question of traditional healers, born-again pastors quoted scriptures from the book of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, or Isaiah, stating the Bible says we should not consult with the dead or anybody who does. Taken together, the sangomas I met during fieldwork preserved a sense of distinctive 'African

identity in an increasingly globalized and “Westernized” country. By contrast, African Christians reviled them as “primitive”, dirty and spiritually dangerous’ (Thornton 2009, 17).¹²

The remainder of this article discusses the Bungoma mediation practices in Alexandra township. I show that the deliberations in this context not only exemplify a specific hermeneutic approach to conflict resolution, but also that these practices can be understood to constitute a form of activism that aims at the integration and legitimation of Bungoma within justice-related governmental structures.

4 *Bungoma Mediation Practices*

During the many conversations I had with healers in Alex, many of them stressed the precolonial role of sangomas as counsel to chiefs and traditional leaders. More importantly for this paper, they mention their role as deliberators in customary courts (also noted in Hund 2000; Burchardt 2017 citing Harnischfeger 2003). Customary (or indigenous) law is recognised in section 211(3) of the Constitution of South Africa. Yet despite the precolonial heritage of customary legal structures and its inclusion in the constitution, the predominant morality of judicial reproduction enacted through South Africa’s present-day governmental structures are predicated on the ‘Roman-Dutch system of law which centres on the [idea of a] contract between the state and the individual’ (Wielenga 2018, 6).

According to the chairperson of the Forum, traditional healers were encouraged to organize themselves in formal associations toward the end of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency (also see Czeglédy 2008; Africa Union 2007). During this time, the chairperson further stated, there was an initiative by healers of the Gauteng Province to produce a more encompassing institutional framework.¹³ The healers in Alex established the Alexandra Traditional and Faith Healers’ Forum.¹⁴ For the healers involved, democracy was a guiding principle for running their organisation and navigating existing legal structures. In 2017 the Forum consisted of two elected representatives from four different healer organisations¹⁵ in the township; the elected representatives decided among themselves who would fill the other leadership positions—chairperson, deputy chair, secretary, deputy secretary, and four coordinators.

For the past decade or so, the Forum has conducted mediation sessions in Alexandra. They address two to seven cases a month dealing with, among other things, issues of witchcraft and bewitchment, domestic abuse and violence, property disputes, family and neighbourly concerns, and malpractice

by healers. They are also engaged in settling financial and social concerns as well as disputes among healers and disputes between healers and their students, such as issues of financial exploitation, duration of training, or even violence (see case below). Nevertheless, the Forum is marginal in many respects. It lacks resources, visibility, and formal legitimation. In 2018, they are without a physical office and, apart from the use of a PCO boardroom, lack meaningful access to resources for record keeping and storage, as well as administrative and technological capacities (e.g., no computers or audio-recording devices). The elected members of the Forum convene voluntarily to engage in the cases brought to them, which they sometimes conduct from morning until late afternoon.

A mediation process in the Forum is usually initiated by a complainant who has either taken a case directly to the PCO or spoken to a healer, who then refers the complainant to the PCO. The PCO then provides a summons for the secretary and deputy secretary of the Forum to be delivered to the parties involved as well as to all witnesses. If the party does not show up on the summoned date, the PCO contacts the local police to retrieve him or her. If the party cannot be reached, the Forum secretary coordinates with the police to redeliver the summons on a later date. Any additional assistance from the police is by request through the PCO and considered on a case-by-case basis. In other words, the PCO is the primary intermediary between the Forum and the police. According to my interlocutors in the Forum, the alliance with the PCO is due to Thabo Mbeki's initiative mentioned above as part of the African National Congress (ANC) government, and the PCO's willingness to provide resources. Mediations in the Forum are provided at no cost to the clients, and they are also much less time-consuming than proceedings in the magistrates' court. Once a case is noted by the PCO, it is often heard as early as the following week and discussed in one of the local languages spoken in Alex. When there is at least one case to be dealt with, the healers convene once a week, in addition to their general meetings, to deliberate matters.

When both parties of the conflict are present for mediation, the eight members of the Forum first hear the complainant's side of the story and then ask questions for clarification. The defendant then shares their side of the story, which is again followed by a series of questions. Once both sides have presented their cases along with any statements from witnesses, members of the Forum deliberate on the cases, either with or without the parties present in the room, and finally recommend a course of action such that both parties can move forward from the dispute. The Forum will often convene a second time to hear additional witnesses or schedule a follow-up meeting to check whether or how the conflict has progressed. Prior to presenting a mediated solution,

the healers often speak at length, offering advice and guidance to both parties about what had transpired and their recommended course of action.

In the past, the Forum has made recommendations for conflict resolution such as payments through monthly installments, family or yard meetings, the release of a student from a verbal contract with a teacher (*gobela*), or the enactment of a particular ritual. However, the healers may also refer the parties to the magistrates' court, ADAPT, or the local pro bono law office. There are cases where the Forum, ADAPT, and the law office mutually seek each other's assistance, thus acknowledging the respective case as a cooperative endeavour. For instance, I observed a case brought to the healers in which a middle-aged woman who was being harassed by her ex-husband who wanted to evict her from a shack in his yard. The woman brought a notice from a law firm, and the healers recommended that she proceed to the pro bono office and file with the magistrates' court system. However, unlike the pro bono law office and ADAPT, the magistrates' court does not consider such a case as a referral from the Forum but rather an isolated registered complaint by an individual. In another case ADAPT sought the Forum's assistance with one of their youth who was having 'fits', or convulsions, which were understood to be symptoms of a 'calling' from the ancestors. One of my interlocutors, Gogo Mamlambo, provided counselling to the child and spoke with her family.

In this way the healers can be said to be intermediaries between conflicts on the ground, Bungoma, and formal judicial structures. The Forum provides a service to local people that addresses not only concerns of witchcraft and *muti*-related crimes,¹⁶ but also issues within the Bungoma praxis itself that are not dealt with through the magistrates' court. For instance, toward the end of 2018 the Forum received the case of a young woman who, together with two younger sisters and a younger cousin, was living with her grandmother in the township. The grandmother was a sangoma and had been training a seventeen-year-old student (*thwasa*). The young lady stated that the *thwasa* was being abusive to the grandchildren, taking money, slapping the grandmother, and claiming to be the grandmother's deceased husband. On another occasion she even claimed to be channelling 'God' (*Unkhulunkhulu*). On the surface, the case evoked issues of child welfare and domestic abuse, which was a partial aspect of the case. However, the specific circumstances and the substance of the complaint was complicated not only by the fact that it was a *thwasa* who was being abusive to the children and the *gobela*, but also by issues pertaining to Bungoma. More specifically, in this case the Forum raised issues about student-teacher (*thwasa*—*gobela*) relations, which may have become sexual; they raised questions about how the *gobela* herself was trained and why she had deviated from her own *gobela*'s teachings and 'roots' (*impande* or

mpandze, see Thornton 2017, 78; Thornton interprets it as a 'guild, college or lodge' (2017, 1)). In response to these questions, the gobela answered that she was starting her own impande separate from her gobela. However, when the Forum pressed her further, it was revealed that she had not undergone the proper procedures and rituals for establishing her own impande. Additional issues pertained to the manifestation of spirits, including discussions about the agency and violence exhibited by channelling spirits and *Unkhulunkhulu*—a claim at which the healers of the Forum scoffed. When seen from the healers' perspective, this case presented a range of concerns within the Bungoma praxis and its lived experiences that would have not been considered relevant or significant in the magistrates' court.

In the healers' attempts to obtain legitimacy and gain further recognition, they have developed relations with the Parliamentary Constituency Office (PCO), Alexandra police, ADAPT, and the pro bono office of a major law firm in the township. However, when I joined them in approaching the magistrates' court to build cooperation the healers were met with resistance. 'Don't you know how law in South Africa works?' was a memorable response from one of the magistrates. The response received from the local magistrates' court, coupled with their controversial status noted above, reflects why the healers of Alex perceive their institution in a marginalised light. According to my interlocutors, the Department of Health and health clinicians conveyed similar expressions of reluctance that discouraged their patients from visiting local healers. In a 2016 workshop organised by the Department of Health, medical doctors and nurses came to the township to speak with Alex's healers about Tuberculosis. The healers appreciated the information but did not appreciate the dismissive attitude toward the healers' practice of 'washing' or 'cleansing' their patients. 'They do not respect us', one of my interlocutors said—referring to government officials, health clinicians, and officials in the magistrates' courts—and added that the healers require status and representation in order to receive further recognition and support from the government.

In this regard, the Forum engages in a form of activism that aims to redress these gaps in the township by resolving conflicts and addressing concerns that emerge from a contemporary Bungoma praxis through its own cultural logics and approaches. Although there are instances when the Forum suggests a complaint is better suited for the magistrates' court, the majority of the Forum's cases aim to mediate any conflicts without referring them to the formal judicial system and before any conflicts escalate into violence.

As mentioned earlier, while the Forum does have working relations with various local non-profit organisations such as ADAPT, the pro-bono law office, and the Community Policing Forum, the Forum does not have a working

relationship with the magistrates' system and police assistance is provided only upon request from the PCO. The assistance by the police is noteworthy when seen in the light of the history of Community Policing Forums in South Africa. According to Richard Wilson, Community Policing Forums were set up in 1994 as a means of eradicating township courts and vigilante groups (see Bapela 1996; Lekalakala 1996; see also Kirsch 2010), and to make the police seem more accountable to the community' and create 'more legitimacy for the criminal justice system' (Wilson 2001, 198). In theory, at Community Policing Forums 'the police would meet with community members, hear their problems, explain their own efforts and come to a common understanding of how to fight crime together. Communities were to become the eyes and ears of the police, and in certain areas this has happened' (*ibid.*). However, Wilson notes, 'the Community Policing Forum strategy has met with mixed results. There has been a tendency among police officers to show "limited commitment to substantial change" and to see community participation as an irritating waste of time, as politically-driven social work which detracts from the main aim of catching criminals' (*ibid.*, citing Schärf 1997, 21).

Similarly, the healers' Forum does not have the authority to enforce any course of action that emerges from mediations. Hence, the scope of the Forum's efficacy is limited. Cases may not reach a satisfactory resolution to the conflict or an experience of having accessed justice. For example, in the case above the grandchildren eventually left their grandmother while the *thwasa* remained in the home despite her abusive behaviour. This contrasts with the Forum's recommendation that the healer, as a caretaker, should look after the grandchildren and ensure their safety as well as make amends with her own *gobela* by undertaking the proper rituals for starting her own *impande*. However, this particular healer, while acting complacently during multiple mediation sessions, decided to not follow the Forum's suggestions nor did she take any particular interests in the welfare of her grandchildren. According to my interlocutors in the Forum, there was nothing else they could do. In short, this was a case in which the healers of the Forum felt a lack of authority, legal recognition, and power to do anything about this particular healer. This made them worry about how they could handle more serious cases in the future and what they could do when dealing with problematic healers beyond merely making suggestions.

5 Conclusions

This paper positioned my research with traditional African healers in the Alexandra township and their engagement with the community as a kind of

activism that is both internally and externally oriented. On one hand, the healers are active in addressing their controversial reputation by participating in protests, interfaith prayer gatherings, and mediating conflicts that arise from within their praxis. Although the healers continue to be labelled as 'crooks', the mediation cases conducted by the Forum illustrate an ongoing struggle to rectify their negative reputation as well as an attempt to address dubious or criminal practices that emerge from within the Bungoma tradition. In this regard, I have argued that the healers aim to bring further accountability to their practice and present an activism that engages internal issues with a view toward achieving greater recognition and representation. On the other hand, despite a long-standing precolonial tradition and ubiquitous presence across the country, the healers feel that the Bungoma institution has been marginalised by government and public institutions. At present, there are 47 governmental departments in South Africa. The healers' praxis is relevant to several departments, such as Health, Justice and Constitutional Development, Social Development, Traditional Affairs, and Arts and Culture and yet the primary locus of engagement is with the department of health. The healers' participation and activism in the domain of justice is indicative of attempts to go beyond departmental constrictions and appeal to multiple aspects of South African society. In this regard, the healers of the Alexandra Forum are engaging in an externally oriented activism for a better life and against adverse social development toward healers in the country. In the absence of a meaningful THP Act and a lack of engagement by the government with the Bungoma institution, the healers' activism is, in this respect, institutional. The pursuit of status and representation not only translates as an attitude toward government but also pertains to how the Forum has been organised and leadership roles have been assigned within its governing structure. In other words, the designated roles and organisational structure of the Forum reflect an appeal for recognition and legitimacy.

The healers' activism further engages the distinction between tradition and reform in a manner such that the former is a means for the latter. The sustained reproduction and application of the Bungoma tradition by healers in their mediation practices and the reinvention of their identities through community engagement and building alliances with organisations like ADAPT have enabled healers to draw on their tradition as the primary vehicle for reform and social change. In other words, the healers' adaptive praxis and tradition—as a form of what is right or good—is a means 'to question [government] authority, to improve, [and] correct past mistakes' (Lambek 2012, 351) in South African society. Not only does the healers' mediation expand definitions of justice from its Roman-Dutch framework toward an African orientation and expresses a role for healers beyond the domain of health, but

their community engagement also speaks to the 'minoritarian majority' population who engage with traditional African healing practices in one form or another. The use of tradition as a means of reform thereby brings together a model of the world as it is in which healers are marginal with a model for the world as it should be that integrates healers into various aspects of governance and society. For healers, the predominant model of South African society and their view of what it should be present a gap, as well as differences, between two moralities of reproduction¹⁷ highlighted here by the magistrates' system and the minoritarian majority system of traditional healing.¹⁸ By conducting mediations, the healers are simultaneously involved in the short-term engagement of individual cases that also contribute to the long-term reproduction of the Bungoma framework in addressing conflict that serves alongside the reproduction of the magistrates' system. The healers' dual engagement of internal and external activism not only expresses an internal cultural logic in addressing issues within the Bungoma praxis and its public perception, but also presents an external view toward closing the gap between institutions.

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Notes

- 1 'Traditional healer' is an umbrella term in South Africa that includes several types of healers. A *sangoma* is traditional healer who practices divination; an *inyanga* or *igedla* is an herbalist; an *ababelethisi* or *umbelethisi* is a traditional birth attendant; an *inacibi* or *umkhiphi wengoma* is a traditional surgeon; and *umthandazi* or *mporofiti* is a faith healer. Moreover, many healers I came across during fieldwork were both *sangoma* and *umthandazi*, which presents concerns with standardizing attempts by the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (see Government Gazette 2005; South African Government 2007).
- 2 See Robbins for a discussion on the 'suffering subject' and the 'anthropology of the good' in which he considers the various ways people strive to live in a better world that 'they imagine and their ways of trying to get to them' (2013, 459).
- 3 anthropology of morality (Howell 1997); anthropology of ethics (Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2002); anthropology of the good (Robbins 2013); moral anthropology (Fassin 2012); ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010; Das 2010).
- 4 In his essay 'The Determination of Moral Facts' Emile Durkheim fashions a view of morality in terms of external 'system(s) of rules of conduct', which we adhere to and obey not only 'because they command' but also because there is an interest and desire to oblige (Fassin 2012, 7; citing Durkheim 1974[1906], 35–36). Durkheim's notion of morality broadly includes the social and the mundane, such as traffic laws or dining etiquette, as well as cultural and subcultural perspectives on what one should and ought to do.
- 5 In contrast, the morality of freedom is characterised by Max Weber's emphasis on 'intentional rather than obligatory' dimensions of action and agency focusing on 'thought (or meaning) over ritual' (Lambek 2012, 349). This view of morality, which has also been defined as ethics (although I do not make a distinction between the two; see Taylor 1996, Kleinman 2006, Lambek 2010, Faubion 2011, Das 2012), is largely understood through the lens of Michel Foucault and 'the ways individuals might take themselves as the object of reflective action, adopting voluntary practices to shape and transform themselves in various ways' (Laidlaw 2014, 111). It is 'characterized by a sense on the part of social actors that they need to make moral choices, often between competing goods, and that it can be difficult to do this well' (Robbins 2012, 119).
- 6 Both internal and external concerns overlap with regard to the Traditional Health Practitioners Act of 2004 and 2007 (THP Act; see Government Gazette 2005 and South African Government 2007).
- 7 The article draws on fieldwork with traditional healers in Alexandra, attending various protests and social engagement events, semi-structured interviews, and observation of their mediations from February 2017 to December 2018, as well as consistent online communication with my interlocutors throughout 2019.

- 8 In April 2019 protestors in Alex staged a #TotalShutDown in which burning tires served as roadblocks for any traffic going through the township to highlight the lack of service delivery and a demand to speak to the mayor. As Burchardt notes, 'So engrained is the belief in the vocabulary of legal entitlements that failure to fulfill service delivery rights on the part of the state seems to justify service delivery riots in the eyes of many' (2017, 265), although the #AlexTotalShutDown was hardly a riot.
- 9 The statistics of such crimes are necessarily partial and indicative. They do not represent crimes that were not reported, nor do they convey various subcategories within conventional categories of crime.
- 10 Here I do not simply refer to citizenship in terms of legal status or legal rights (Marshall 1950) but rather in terms of interpersonal practices as expressions of community that enable issues of social justice to become visible and brought forth for discussion and action (Oosterlynck et al. 2016; Fraser 2010). In other words, interpersonal practices are practices of citizenship when a collective gives recognition and visibility to issues and raises them into the domain of public concern (Oosterlynck et al. 2016). In this regard, the healers of Alex are both practitioners of a diverse Bungoma tradition and also citizens concerned with what is happening in the township.
- 11 According to my interlocutors, there used to be an agreed-on cross-referral system between healers and health clinics in which both would refer patients to one another along with a report of what was being treated. However, the cross-referral system quickly became one directional, from healers to clinics. The healers would send their patients to the clinics, but the patients would not return to engage with the healers. I was informed that when the healers inquired into why their patients did not return to them, they learned that the clinicians were advising patients to not do so. The healers in Alex discontinued the format for referring patients. Although the formal referral system dissipated, healers in Alex will send a patient to the clinic if they assess that they are unable to treat the patient's problem.
- 12 Van Dijk (2000) presents similar sentiments on the attitudes of born-again Christians in Malawi and Werbner (2011) on attitudes of African Apostolics in Botswana. The tensions are indicative of perennial concerns regarding modernity and tradition, which serve as the background context for the healers' activism. The debate also feeds into debates around decoloniality emphasized by Quijano (2007).
- 13 However, the healers in the Forum think the Gauteng framework is disintegrating due to lack of leadership. They often mention the lack of communication between the Gauteng Forum and the Alexandra Forum. The chairperson of the Alexandra Forum confirmed the lack of communication. He also noted that other healer forums across the province are not as stable as Alex.
- 14 The chairperson was unable to provide documentation for this initiative, but instead took me to the households of the first leaders of the Alexandra Forum for discussion.
- 15 In 2016–17 the Forum consisted of five women and three men. However, the gender dynamics are subject to change because of the role of the healers' ancestors during deliberation. I have been told that the ancestors sometimes advise the healers during their deliberations. For example, one healer noted that the ancestor may vary from day to day. On the mother's side a great-grandmother or grandmother may avail herself, and on the father's side a great-grandfather or an uncle may whisper into the healer's ear. In other words, any one of four ancestral spirits may speak to this particular healer during a case. Hence, the gender dynamics within and among the healers may vary, as will the deliberations of a case. That is, the gender of a physical body may differ from the gender of what is spiritually expressed. In this regard, the argument about patriarchy and male-dominated structures—a concern often mentioned by civil society organisations, nongovernment organisations, embassies, and related institutions—with regard to the healers' Forum

becomes ambiguous and unclear. Furthermore, the members have changed in 2018, and an interlocutor recently informed me that there are now more than four as well as many unaccounted healer organisations.

- 16 See the Witchcraft Suppression Act 1957 (Comaroff 1993; Ralushai Commission 1996; Minaar 1997, 2003; Hund 2000; Niehaus 2001; Ashforth 2005; Burchardt 2017), which the South African Law Reform Commission has had under review since 2012; see also the THP Act 2007; Willoughby 1899; see Vaughan 1991 for East and Central Africa.
- 17 See Parry and Bloch 1989 for discussion on the morality of exchange and the dynamics between reproduction and freedom.
- 18 See Bozzoli 1998 and Wilson 2001 for discussion regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Human Rights hearings and the two expressions of justice that emerged in Alexandra.