Harnessing the ancestors: uncertainty and ritual practice in the Eastern Cape

18 *Harnessing the ancestors: Uncertainty and ritual practice in the Eastern Cape*

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A central ethnographic research interest of mine for nearly two decades has been to explore the myriad ways in which cattle (and other agrarian resources, including local knowledge) are practically and discursively enmeshed in the everyday livelihoods, accumulation strategies and domestic struggles of the Xhosa-speaking people who live in the 70 or so villages in Ngqushwa Municipality. Ngqushwa is in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa and was part of the Ciskei bantustan under apartheid.[1] In this chapter, I explore how rural and urban-based women and men – through their selective engagement with specific cultural norms – contest the spaces opened up by their shared desire to fund, prepare for and perform rituals. I demonstrate how people across Ngqushwa Municipality rhetorically and practically link ritual to the central cultural tropes that stress mutual support and reciprocity at two levels: (1) intra-homestead through *ukwakh'umzi* (to build the home) and (2) inter-homestead through *masincedisane* (let us help each other). I suggest that their activities and interactions during the consumption of traditional beer, brandy and the meat of ritually slaughtered animals are geared towards performing and contesting these two cultural scripts.

The contested social reproduction of migrant-dominated households in rural Lesotho of nearly 40 years ago, as described in the late Colin Murray's (1981) penetrating analysis, bears a resemblance to the situation in the rural Eastern Cape in the period from 2001 to 2018 (see Bank & Kenyon in this volume). However, some things are different: for the people of Hobana,[2] situated along the coast about an hour's drive southwest from the port city of East London, some two decades of dramatic economic

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Africa* 84(4): 230–252. I have conducted ethnographic research on rural livelihoods and agrarian change in villages across Ngqushwa Municipality since 1994 (see Ainslie 1999, 2005). Although I have undertaken research and initiated development work in 10 different villages in the district over this period, I have focused my ethnographic research in 3 of these villages. I have resided in these 3 villages for 24 months, first conducting research for my MA degree (Ainslie 1998) and then my doctoral fieldwork (2000/01). Until December 2008, I lived and worked about 1.5 hours' drive from these three key fieldwork sites and I was able to visit them intermittently over the course of the subsequent decade (2001–10). I returned to stay in one village (Hobana) for 2 weeks in 2009 and for 3 weeks in 2012. I also conducted further research in 2012 in the second village site of my doctoral research.

2 This is a pseudonym for one of the two villages. This one consists of 254 homesteads, where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork over the past decade.

and social change (which have had overwhelmingly adverse impacts on the surety of migrant labour, resource transfers and thus on the status of the embattled rural homestead) mean that a number of fundamental uncertainties abound. As a result, different members of homesteads calibrate and recalibrate their commitments to joint projects, using the two dominant cultural tropes, as their circumstances change according to some plan or more likely shift unexpectedly.

One significant point of social fracture is between senior men and women. A large proportion of the energies of rural men, especially seniors (in terms of age and as *intsika/entloko yekhaya* – literally the pillar/head of the home), has been directed at maintaining their position in the social life of the home and the village. One way to ensure this is by performing the culturally normative connection between slaughter rituals for ancestor veneration – or, for Christians, for the purposes of feeding those attending the funeral – and the cattle that men control (that is, forging regularly and repeatedly in everyone's minds the connection between cattle ownership, ritual slaughter to the ancestors, and good fortune or well-being). Thus slaughter rituals go some way towards shoring up this enclaved position – or in Appadurai's (1986) terminology, to continuously (re)construct and delimit the 'commodity candidacy' – of the 'things of men' in the rural economy: en bloc, senior men seek to retain the position of cattle (and goats), which they control and which constitute a social arena from which women are actively excluded, as goods that are symbolically central to the male-interceded and ancestor-endorsed ritual well-being of the homestead and also to that of the wider community.

But the first decades of the 21st century have thus far been unkind to these men – surprisingly perhaps, given the stark material deprivations and psychological indignities wrought by apartheid, arguably *more so* than the preceding one. For the most part, people in rural South Africa are poor and getting poorer (Sender 2016). The reality for the residents of Ngqushwa Municipality is that their homestead units are getting smaller and their offspring, who are highly mobile between town and country, cannot always be relied upon to support their natal homes (cf. Posel & Marx 2013). Except for a tiny minority, agriculture and livestock rearing in rural Ngqushwa Municipality is not a viable livelihood option, and a growing reliance on the post-1994 social grant 'economy' has emerged and has rapidly become entrenched (Seekings 2011).[3]

For the majority of senior men – with their increasingly atomised, desperate shuttling between town and rural areas; their shifting in and (increasingly permanently) out of stable employment; and their struggles with alcohol, women, money, their offspring and with one another – the hardship of life on the periphery is unrelenting and becoming ever more difficult (Ainslie 2005; Du Toit & Neves 2014;

3 Social grants (old age, disability and child support) have paradoxically reinstated certain kin as key to rural livelihoods and to homestead reproduction (Bähre 2011; Bank & Minkley 2005). Bähre (2011: 381) notes that 'of the total number of social grants that the state distributed in 2006, almost 90% was for pensioners (old age grants) and young women (child support grants)'.

Hull & James 2012; Rogan in this volume). The main source of cash income in the majority of their homesteads nowadays is the state-provided old-age pension or disability grant. These have replaced in importance the wages for what was in decades past onerous, often dangerous and thus highly valorised migrant labour. In consequence, the economic position of senior men – and thus also, to an increasing degree, their social position – is under incredible strain (Bank 2002). Not surprisingly, some of these men prove to be unreliable, duplicitous and generally unequal to the task of individually shouldering the responsibilities they must bear in order to maintain their social status (in their homesteads and in the village) as *intsika yekhaya* and collectively as the voices of their communities. As a result, their corporate, patriarchal control of ritual performance is itself threatened. This further hampers their efforts to temper the chronic uncertainty of the times and, in the process, to exercise control over women and young people in the fragmented, contested and thus fragile social and economic relationships and configurations that constitute homesteads, village community life and the 'in-between' spaces that are 'not village–not town' (Ngwane 2003: 696; White 2011).

If senior men find themselves increasingly emasculated and their social position under threat, 'their' women are more assertive than ever – wives, unmarried women, widows and daughters differ markedly from their menfolk in that they frequently find ways to act in mutual groups to support and drive a common social project (Bank 2001; Jones 1996). Many of these co-operative projects involve the performance of ritual, including the initiation ritual that transforms boys into men, for which the single mothers of initiates turn for financial support to their mutual group. Moreover, in the case of funerals and other significant rituals, which may attract between 30 and 300 or more people, it is undoubtedly the cultural memory, the practical knowledge and the substantial labours of women working together that underpin the financing, the extensive planning and preparations, and ultimately the successful performance of rituals in villages across the district.

In the section that follows, I briefly situate in both time and space the practice of rituals in rural places such as Ngqushwa Municipality. I show how geography and the shifting nature of economic marginalisation shape different people's commitment to ritual practice and the homestead (Bank & Minkley 2005; McAllister 2001; cf. Boissevain 1984).

In the second and main section of this chapter, I explore the reciprocities that exist in all villages to distribute the relatively high costs of hosting rituals across local social networks. These *masincedisane* (let us help each other) mechanisms include local burial societies and buying clubs that are almost exclusively the preserve of women. I show that it is these groups that play an important role in building and maintaining relations between homesteads and wider kin in rural areas within the overall context of increased residential fluidity and urban–rural straddling. In the case of better-resourced and better-educated households, the societies and clubs themselves tend to straddle rural and urban areas and constitute an important economic and social bridge between the rural village and the town (or towns) and city beyond.

In the third section of this chapter, I briefly examine the rituals that were conducted in Hobana Village over a 12-month period during 2001. I consider which rituals were performed most frequently and what role women working together played in them.

I conclude this chapter with the observation that the hosting of rituals serves multiple purposes, not least of which is to underscore and strengthen the position of the host homestead within the networks of kinship, reciprocity and social affiliation/distance in the village. Hosting a ritual has probably always been a finely balanced social, economic and cultural performance that must, on the one hand, be carefully orchestrated to achieve its effects and, on the other, is a political act of asserting control over the work and attentions of others. Increasingly, it is women, working in close co-operation with one another, who are asserting greater control over this culturally vital space.

Situating ritual practice

To understand ritual practice, as in all things social, history matters. Without the space here to review the lasting impact of the devastating colonial and apartheid history of this region (see Ainslie 1999; Mager 1992, 1999; Switzer 1993), I present a potted history of ritual in the Eastern Cape Province by revisiting McAllister's useful distinction between what he calls *ancestor or kinship* rituals on the one hand and *beer-drinks* on the other hand (McAllister 1997). Based on 25 years of fieldwork conducted in the agriculturally active Shixini area of Willowvale District in the former Transkei, McAllister (1980: 211, 2001: 183) argues that ancestor rituals were based on clan and kinship ties, with significant elements played out in the cattle enclosure (widely referred to as the 'kraal') of each homestead (*umzi*; plural *imizi*). He claims that these rituals 'ha[d] little relevance for the nature of everyday social interaction … [and had] a relatively atemporal and formal character' (see also McAllister 1997). He argues that unlike beer-drinks, these *ancestor* rituals had a fairly fixed structure in which oratory and a predetermined spatial sequence featured prominently in order to 'stress genealogical order, the unity of the kin group and the relationship between living and dead, and [thus had] a timeless quality, largely unrelated to the actual process of everyday life, which [was] based on territorial relations and co-operation between neighbours' (McAllister 2001: 183).

More significantly, McAllister (1997: 282) argues that the oratory at these rituals not only 'communicates information about the ritual, but also about values and norms, group boundaries, hierarchies [including gender hierarchies] and social distance, and degrees of inclusion and exclusion'. Thus these rituals were concerned more with *normative* and *structural* relationships and tended to exclude, or at least clearly delineate, non-kin who may nonetheless be important to the host homestead in everyday situations.

He contrasts these rituals with the beer-drinks, which he proceeded to study in considerable detail. Beer-drinks, McAllister (1997: 299) argues, 'differ[ed] from

ancestor rituals … [especially with regard to] the active role of neighbours and local territorial groups' in the ritual. It was precisely these non-kin participants who were more important than kin and clans-people in overcoming the practical problems of everyday rural life in Shixini, and this was what made beer-drinks so interesting. He suggests that, in sharp contrast to ancestor rituals, beer-drinks were forums for discussing community affairs and (as manifestations of the local community in action) they allowed for the expression of important social principles, including 'locality, neighbourliness, co-operation, sharing and the interdependence of homesteads' (McAllister 1997: 299, 303).

Why should this apparently sharp structural disjuncture between ancestor rituals and beer-drinks have existed in people's ritual practice in Shixini? McAllister argues persuasively that it had to do with the important change, since about the 1920s, in the ways in which the maintenance of local economic activity in Shixini had come to depend less on kinship ('blood' relatives) and more on co-operative labour and the pooling of resources between neighbouring homesteads. He links this to the break-up of what were previously larger, extended homesteads which, when coupled with the increase in male labour migration around that time, meant that individual homesteads became more dependent on others (especially on their immediate neighbours) for their economic survival (Manona 1999; McAllister 1997: 296).

McAllister takes this a logical step further by expounding upon what he saw as a more generalised transition from ancestor rituals to beer-drinks that followed from a shift from kinship to neighbourhood and a sense of community as 'the major organising principle' within Shixini itself and the wider Gatyana District (McAllister 1997: 305–306; cf. Bell 1997: 255).

When applied to the ethnographic data on the performance of rituals I collected in Ngqushwa Municipality from 2001 to 2012, McAllister's binary distinction between ancestor rituals (stressing the kin group) and beer-drinks (emphasising the more economically significant, everyday relations based on neighbourhood) seems to work less well. In the interests of brevity, the four reasons I identified for why this might be so are summarised here. First, in relation to agrarian production, I found that there is far less 'agrarian-based' co-operation and interdependence between homesteads in rural Ngqushwa Municipality than McAllister found in Shixini. This relates to the dramatic decline in agricultural activity (especially in field cultivation) across what is now known as Ngqushwa Municipality since the early 1950s so that, by the mid-1970s, there was virtually no field cultivation except along the coast where the rainfall is higher. In fact, because of population pressure, there is widespread (arable) landlessness among rural homesteads. This, I suggest, undermined any vestige of an agrarian interdependence between rural people. This periodisation may be more in tune with the Ciskei experience than the wetter coastal districts of the former Transkei.

By comparison to this alarming decline in agrarian production, the coastal village of Hobana has managed to retain a relatively buoyant agricultural sector. This is partly because some households were allocated 2-hectare plots of land, which were large

enough to be subdivided for residential and arable purposes. In consequence, during the 2000/01 growing season, as many as 39% of the 254 homesteads in Hobana Village ploughed and planted their arable 'allotments' (often equivalent in size to a home garden) with maize, other field crops (oats, legumes and so on) and vegetables (beans, potatoes and so on). However, only a small number of these homesteads did so by participating in the type of ploughing companies and other co-operative work parties that McAllister found to be common in Shixini. Thus, even in Hobana, with its higher levels of agrarian activity than elsewhere in Ngqushwa Municipality, the tasks relating to agrarian cultivation are individualised and commoditised. While I found a small number of homesteads that practise forms of non-monetised exchange of factors of production, specifically *isahlulo* (share-cropping), the majority of households pay to have their fields ploughed and planted by ox- or tractor-drawn plough. Most people also pay for weeding services that are provided by women who, while they often work in groups, are paid a daily rate on an individual basis.

To summarise then, the emphasis on agrarian production in rural Ngqushwa Municipality has shifted in two respects (cf. Ainslie 2005; Bank & Qambata 1999). First, in line with a generalised pattern in the rural Eastern Cape, a shift has taken place towards homestead autonomy in terms of engagement in productive activities. Indeed, most cultivation occurs in the more private space of people's home gardens, some of which are barely big enough to warrant ploughing with oxen or by tractor (cf. Bank 2002: 637; Hebinck et al. 2018). Second, a more significant shift is evident in which most rural homesteads have moved from being sites of productive agrarian activity to sites of consumption (Ainslie 1998; Ngwane 2003: 699). These two factors taken together mean that I found that the kinds of beer-drinks that are so vividly described by McAllister as an integral part of co-operative agrarian activities in Shixini were virtually non-existent in Ngqushwa Municipality, because the specifically co-operative element itself was lacking.[4]

A second significant difference when compared with Shixini, and allied to the decline in field-scale agricultural activity, is that in Ngqushwa Municipality there was an earlier decline in the proportion of men engaged in classic, long-distance migrant labour. Men as household heads are either relatively close at hand, being residents of towns and cities in the region, or are resident in the village. Unlike the many men (and women) in places such as Shixini who continue – against the odds – to seek employment as long-distance migrants in urban centres and distant mines (see Bank 2015), town-based Ngqushwa people are less inclined to enter into formal arrangements with their neighbours and kinsmen to keep an eye on their homesteads, arable lands and livestock. This more *local habitation*, coupled with their almost inevitable reliance on the post-1994 social welfare economy (see below), has fostered an emphasis on economic independence and autonomy at the homestead level, with negative implications for 'everyday' mutual assistance and reciprocity between

4 Many beer-drinks were in fact held in Hobana, but they were not linked to co-operative agrarian activities.

homesteads, at least as far as men are concerned. The subsequent substantial out-migration of women and younger people to regional towns and cities from the late 1990s has in part shifted this balance, as homesteads with insufficient child labour to carry out domestic chores (firewood collection, cooking and herding) are forced to turn for assistance to homesteads with an excess of such labour.

A third reason is that while the local economy in Ngqushwa Municipality is heavily reliant on sources of income derived from outside the district, investing in one's home village is not as attractive or as critical as it might once have been (Ainslie 1999, 2005). Primary among the sources of rural incomes are state-provided old-age pensions, disability and child support grants, and grants for people infected with HIV. Remittances (although not always regular) from those family members employed in urban centres are important 'top-ups' for many rural households. As most reliable, longer-term employment opportunities (which are in diminishing supply) in the region are town-based, people have had to invest in their extended social networks, and there exist elaborate and long-standing patterns of rural–urban oscillation between rural Ngqushwa and especially the cities of Port Elizabeth and East London. Mobility between town and country thus plays a critical role in the circulation of resources, of people and of information about job opportunities and social news, including of deaths, funerals, weddings and other ritual events to be held in rural villages or in town. While, as White (2011: 109) puts it, 'men and women alike are propelled into highly mobile quests for private income', as far as rural villagers are concerned, the village homestead remains an anchor and a reference point – thus the ultimate purpose of this mobility is to provide a steady stream of resources in cash and in kind to rural homesteads. Their aim is to seek constantly to bring the town closer to the village (Ainslie 2005; Bank 2015). For village-based homesteads, there are therefore powerful economic, cultural and social reasons for seeking to keep town-based household and lineage members involved in the affairs of the rural *umzi*.

The economic downturn that accompanied the Zuma presidency has widened socioeconomic differences between homesteads in the villages and has put further pressure on homestead economic independence. This has generated social tensions as poorer individuals and homesteads apply moral pressure on wealthier homesteads to assist them materially, principally by invoking the *masincedisane* norm. Compared with the situation in other Ngqushwa villages, and for reasons I will not explore here, these socioeconomic cleavages in Hobana are particularly marked. This has found expression in the relatively higher number of slaughter rituals which, on an individual basis, have a higher redistributive effect than beer-drinks conducted by wealthier homesteads in Hobana. However, this does not mean that beer-drinks are unimportant in respect of the commensality they enact, and in supplementing the diets of poorer people. In Hobana, there are a number of poorer people for whom survival from week to week is partly dependent upon attending every beer-drink held in the village, where they consume significant amounts of nutritious *mqombothi* (home-brewed sorghum beer) and might be fortunate enough to be served a meal, sometimes in exchange for undertaking a minor chore of some sort or other.

A fourth and final feature of life in Ngqushwa (and presumably this is also the case in Shixini) is something that is part of a longer pattern that has been in evidence since at least the mid-1980s and earlier (see Mager 1999) but which has become further accentuated following the 1994 democratic transition. This is the steady rise in the economic independence and growing assertiveness of especially younger, better-educated women, which has reached a social tipping point of sorts. These are women who have found skilled employment as teachers, nurses and government employees (that is, positions of real social authority), and have increasingly sought to challenge the patriarchal power of senior men in the private sphere of the homestead and the local public sphere of the village. Older women who, since the mid-1990s, have qualified for old-age pensions at age 60, 5 years earlier than men (who, until quite recently, only qualified at 65 years of age), have also found their social position bolstered vis-à-vis men in general. It is clear that these developments, coupled with the tensions caused by the relentless spread of HIV/AIDS, have thrown gender and generational relations in the household and the village (already fractious) into further, significant disarray (cf. Ngwane 2003; *Daily Dispatch* 2007[5]).

These serious disruptions in normative relations between differently situated people, which are played out socially and economically, appear to also require some form of public expression. One unfortunate form is that of widespread, searing domestic and social violence. In 1996/97, in the second village where I conducted doctoral fieldwork, four elderly women were accused of being witches and responsible for the suspicious death of a 'healthy' young woman. They were severely beaten by a group of young men in the community and then held hostage in a hut until they were 'ready' to confess to their supposed crime. The young men were finally persuaded, through the intercession of the police, to release the terrified women. Witchcraft beliefs remain a serious matter and a source of anxiety for many people in the villages of Ngqushwa, and indeed across the province, as they go about their daily lives (on witchcraft in South Africa, see Ashforth 1998; Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Niehaus 2001, 2005). Sexual assaults, rape and domestic violence against women have reached truly appalling levels in the province and Ngqushwa is no different in this regard (Dunkle et al. 2007).

New spaces for women, stasis for men

In her incisive study of the Marakwet of Kenya, Moore (1986: 89) notes that 'spatial representations express in their own logic the power relations between different groups; they [spatial representations] are therefore active instruments in the production and reproduction of the social order'. Elsewhere, she argues that meanings are not inherent in the organisation of domestic space, but must be continuously 'invoked through the activities of social actors' (see Moore 1986: 9; Ferguson 1992). This is clearly evident in what to many observers may be

5 Peddie's hope against domestic violence, *Daily Dispatch*, 31 August.

surprisingly dynamic residential arrangements in Hobana and most other villages in Ngqushwa Municipality.

The Xhosa *umzi* is, first and foremost, the (residential) site where the rituals of an agnatically bounded group of patrilineally related kin are conducted, always under the watchful eye of a male homestead head and his agnatic elders. What this definition means is that many of the woman-headed households (except those headed by widows) are disqualified from being fully socially recognised as *imizi*. A 34-year-old single mother, Nomakutele, who was a resident of a newer section of Hobana Village, put it plainly when she told me that she went to her father's family home in Hobana to conduct rituals (her father himself had relocated to another village after he divorced her mother). 'Any cow that I [caused to be] slaughtered at my mother's home would not bellow,' she told me, 'because those [people] are not my ancestors.'

While town-based *umzi* members are by no means reluctant participants in village-centred ritual practice, there are differences in their levels of engagement: the unmarried or separated 'daughters' of village homesteads identify most strongly with their rural *umzi* and value highly their association with their home village. This rests partly on their need to maintain a rural base for young children of school-going age, but it is clear that women continue to do much of the kin- and community-building work. This is demonstrated through their regular visits and their often substantial material contributions to their rural homes.

Attempts to 'feminise' residential spaces

Over the past 20 years, women and some economically and socially marginal, unmarried or separated men have set up their own households in ever-increasing numbers in 'in-between spaces' in Hobana Village. Often these households consist of nothing more than a one-roomed, corrugated tin shack and a minimally fenced 'site', with improvements gradually being undertaken as – or if – income streams improve. The 'informal' settlement area to the west of the village – known as eNdlovini (literally 'the place of the elephant' or a place taken by force) – is very much in this mould, and has existed since local people 'invaded' this land in 1993 and erected their shacks on it. In contrast, and indeed partially in response to the social and infrastructural unruliness of eNdlovini, the small, 33-unit Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) block-plan housing development (known as Phola Park, after the infamously violent township settlement in Gauteng Province) was completed in 1999, right in the centre of the village.

On the face of it, what these two settlements represent is a significant 'decompression' of the congestion previously experienced within the established homesteads in Hobana. This was what everyone whom I interviewed about these housing developments in Hobana told me. Within the 245 *occupied* households in the five established village sections, social relations that had been fraught for a long time were reaching breaking point in overcrowded, economically insecure and thus tense

domestic units. Those who could find work in the cities had left the village and the local economic situation was so dire that the local municipal council had applied for RDP funding to initiate a housing project that would address this problem, and would in the process create much-needed employment in the construction thereof.

Both eNdlovini and Phola Park threw a lifeline to many local people, especially single and separated women but also young men.[6] The upshot was a small but significant rise in households. The households in these new settlements were not only smaller in terms of their numbers of household members, but they were also often socially and economically more precariously placed. The establishment of both settlements was resisted by senior men, who recognised in them their further loss of control over two once-subordinate categories of people: women and young men. In both cases, they tellingly couched their objection in the language of the loss of grazing land for their cattle when what they really meant was that their control over the labour and incomes of the members of their *imizi* was thereby further undermined and diminished.

Senior men complained bitterly yet perceptively of the inappropriateness of 'bringing the township to the village' and about a loosening of morals. In a sense, they were vindicated: a number of the women, upon being handed the keys to their new RDP houses, promptly opened shebeens (taverns), while a few were kept in pocket by what were euphemistically called 'boyfriends' (relationships based on varying degrees of sex for money, favours or presents). One issue that men pointed to, certainly in Phola Park although less so in eNdlovini, was that the sites were so small that there was no space to construct a cattle byre (kraal or enclosure) and therefore no place to keep cattle. This meant that the houses here are unlikely to ever be regarded as real homesteads – the sort of places where senior men would attend and, through their attendance, endorse the rituals of the members of that homestead. In this important sense, they were non-places that challenged normative cultural categories. Be that as it may, there is also plenty of evidence of women, in their newfound freedom, co-operating with one another to get by, to the virtual exclusion of men.

When I interviewed her, Nomakutele was living with her 10-year-old daughter in her two-roomed RDP house in Phola Park. She told me that prior to moving there, they had lived with her mother in a one-roomed mud-brick house in the village. She still visited her mother daily to assist her with domestic chores. Nomakutele said that there was 'no space to conduct *imisebenzi* [rituals] at my new house', nor was the place where her mother lived a 'home'. By this, she meant that these places do

6 One woman 'community leader' (who was a driving force behind getting Phola Park established) referred to the housing project as a 'women's zone', claiming that 'men are not there, except as lovers or boyfriends, but not as heads of households at all' – although this is not strictly true. In many respects, Phola Park and eNdlovini mirror many of the new settlements and 'ribbon' developments along important roads up and down the province that serve the same purpose: freeing women (and younger men) from patriarchal controls and effectively bringing them closer to 'the city'.

not constitute recognised Xhosa homesteads.[7] For these reasons, she said, once she got the 'title' to her new house, her plan was to sell it and use the proceeds to build another house in the village, on her mother's site, which was adjacent to her mother's family's site. Crucially, this would allow them to enter into the formal network of *imizi*-centred reciprocal relations of hosting, and assisting with, rituals.

Women's capacity to socialise the flows of money

The phenomenon of an increasing number of (smaller) households within rural village communities has become common across Ngqushwa Municipality (see Ainslie 1998). Some of this was undoubtedly driven by the government's use of the nuclear (or single-mother-headed) household as the unit of choice for social welfare and development programmes. Thus, the delivery of RDP houses to individual households resulted in larger family units breaking up in respect of their residential arrangements (that is, atomising expressly to gain access to the housing benefits on offer). The women who were striking out independently included unmarried, separated and sometimes long-widowed women, emerging from unequal, patriarchal marital and extended social relations in both rural villages and urban settings. They frequently had different social and economic priorities to men and were less inclined to 'waste money', as they saw it, on liquor, for example, but also on livestock that 'died in the drought'. Indeed, many people (both men and women) whom I interviewed in rural Ngqushwa Municipality claimed that women 'held onto' money better and made it 'stretch' further than men. No one ever suggested the reverse might be the case.

Of course, some women do succumb to alcoholism and profligacy; however, it would seem that, on the whole, women are indeed more inclined than men to be thrifty and socially and entrepreneurially minded. Perhaps this is in part because they take greater responsibility as the primary – or only – providers for their dependent children. Certainly it is buttressed by the fact that women tend to display greater interest in so-called 'feminised' forms of saving and are comfortable dealing in cash. By working together in church groups, rotating credit associations (*imigalelo*), burial societies[8] and other savings clubs, women both encourage and enforce a discipline upon one another into acting with a remarkable level of financial probity (cf. James 2012).

7 Of the 33 owners of housing units in Phola Park, only one man claimed to have ritually 'opened' his new home, thereby constituting it an '*umzi*' fit for hosting rituals. None of the others saw this as a priority, because they said they continued to have a ritual and moral affiliation to a homestead in the village.

8 Although they were more active in burial societies, I found very little evidence of participation by men in these clubs. I came across just two cases where men claimed to be members of *imigalelo*, but they did not attend meetings and were 'represented' by their daughter and sister respectively.

Wherever practicable, women rely on formal bank accounts in which to hold their money. Rather than invest in cattle, their patterns of consumption indicate an altogether more cash-based approach whereby they are more integrated into the market and banking system of the 'formal' economy than many men, who tend to harbour a distrust of banks and dislike having to talk to one another about money.[9] Women are conversant with, and less inclined to be suspicious of, new 'technologies' such as automatic teller machines and cellphone technology. Women who hail from villages in Ngqushwa Municipality but who work in towns and cities in the region are often members of burial societies and *imigalelo* there, something that contributes to their greater financial literacy even though their formal educational levels do not differ markedly from those of men.

The policing of ritual spaces

Hosting a ritual, especially one that explicitly invokes the ancestors, acts as a rallying call for the extended patrilineally related kin group. Family members, no matter how geographically dispersed they may be (as far afield as Johannesburg and Cape Town), ignore this call to assist and to participate at their peril. The performance of a ritual, which unfolds over at least two full days, allows for assessments of where the often dispersed members of this 'agnatic cluster' currently stand in relation to each other. Social constructs that are mobilised in the process of ritual practice include notions about the nature of the 'family', 'tradition' and 'home', and associated expectations of appropriate behaviour and support on the part of the individuals or groups as variously delineated by these constructs (Ngwane 2003; White 2011: 110–111; cf. Shipton 2007).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given what I have suggested above, two readily discernible fault lines of these attempts at 'naturalisation through ritual' are those of gender and generation. I found a strict adherence to a gender division of labour in the preparation and performance of rituals. Moreover, a constant regulation of space during all rituals, in the sense of policing which people are occupying what spaces, is a feature of this 'enactment of power'. Why should this be so important? It is because each slaughter ritual is to be explicitly sanctioned by the ancestors, something that is signalled by the bellowing of the sacrificial beast just before its throat is slit. There is an ever-present threat that if the ancestors are displeased about something or someone's behaviour, the beast will not bellow and this would be enough to stop the ritual in its tracks, putting paid to the many months of planning, days of preparation and extensive travel by many of those present. As a consequence of this stipulation (which is scrupulously adhered to), each instance of a slaughter ritual provides a potent, heightened sense of drama and an arena for potential public shaming and

9 Men in this village and elsewhere have failed spectacularly to maintain the cattle-dipping programme, which requires the collection and careful management of regular contributions from each cattle-holding homestead of cash with which to purchase the dipping materials (acaricides).

serious social consternation. This provides men with the licence for the hyper-normative policing of behaviour.

Meticulous differentiation of people in respect of the space they occupy during rituals is undertaken on the basis of several criteria: kinship, affiliation to the homestead conducting the ritual, age and gender. Senior men, for example, consistently dominate the formal speeches given during rituals. Speakers always stand to address those present, while everyone else in the kraal or *rontawu* (a round hut, reserved for ritual observances) is expected to be seated. If a man who is not the eldest non-kin man rises to respond to a speech, he will be admonished and told to sit down. Sometimes, there is a long interruption to proceedings while people wait for the appropriate man to arrive to address the gathering. The youngest man present has to surrender his seat immediately when an older man enters the kraal or beer-drink venue, or find himself berated by the other men present. All other men younger than the person entering have to shuffle along to make available an appropriate place, gauged in terms of the newcomer's position in the age ranking and kinship system. In the cattle kraal, members of the agnatic cluster hosting the ritual and their fellow clansmen sit to the right of the kraal entrance while other men sit to the left. At an indoor beer-drink, men are always seated on the right and the women on the left, as seen from outside, facing the entrance to the *rontawu*.

The same principle applies to women's seating arrangements, which also follow generational seniority, although women often sit on their mats on the floor. Women are not allowed to enter the kraal during a ritual unless they are patrilineally related to the host family (they are considered 'daughters' of the family). No *amankazana* (unmarried mothers) are supposed to attend a beer-drink, unless they are older women (younger *amankazana* do attend, of course, but are expected to stay out of view). I was told that women are not allowed to stay indoors once the meat has been cooked and served at a slaughter ritual. Instead, they have to congregate outside in the courtyard, where they eat their food.

The division of meat, brandy, *mqombothi*, and purchased or bottled beer is done on the basis of age and gender, overseen by a respected man who holds the position of *injoli* (apportioner). *Amaxhego* (old men) get the biggest share of the available brandy and *mqombothi*. In general, *abafazi* (women) are treated as an undifferentiated group when the *injoli* makes his allocations. The women are seated around the home, not near the kraal. Once the women's share is brought over to them, senior women oversee the allocations among the different age categories of women present.

Moore (1986: 171) argues that 'the ability of the dominant model to reproduce itself [rests on] its ability to retain control over the principles of the construction of reality, to frame all competing constructions within its own definitions, [and] to maintain and control the socially dominant representations'. Of course, what is at stake in the hosting of such slaughter rituals is the local expression of the entire edifice of the patriarchy. Slippages in this 'ritualised enactment of power' are acceptable only insofar as they can be framed within this construction. Thus young men will move

(as soon as they can) to a different room or flat on the same property, away from the attentions of their fathers and senior kinsmen, to consume their share of the *mqombothi*, brandy and bottled beer. By removing themselves from the site of the ritual, they are also circumventing the scrutiny of their every move by the senior men. Once isolated, there often emerge additional supplies of lager and brandy, as well as gin, for their private consumption.

Similarly, younger unmarried women may be allocated a bottle or two of brandy or gin to share among themselves. They are required to consume this share discreetly, behind the main house, without inconveniencing the women working there or drawing undue male attention to themselves. The reason why they are given some alcohol, I was told, is that they might refuse to attend rituals in future if their repeated requests for alcohol are ignored.

The work of ritual

In respect of rituals, I contend that it is precisely the *hosting* of rituals (rather than co-operative agricultural production of yore) that has become the quintessential 'co-operative' work that people in dispersed rural and urban households share as they seek to overcome the 'tyranny of distanced separation' (Sansom 1981: 98). In this context, the ritual has become the key performance, with the ancestors themselves invoked to ensure that the mystique of tradition and otherworldliness is summoned to influence and mould the present.

While rooted in older, more normative, cultural and ritual forms, what the current pattern of ritual practice in rural Ngqushwa Municipality demonstrates is that the need exists for regular opportunities to *enact* social relations between kin and between neighbours and other villagers (resident and absent from the village) that will build reciprocity and trust between *imizi* – what I call the 'ritual as work party'. Socially, ancestor rituals, beer-drinks and other ceremonies are about making use of – and in the process building and re-affirming – bonds of kinship, neighbourliness and reciprocity. But it is the relative *absence* of both overlapping relationships predicated on everyday co-operative, agrarian production and a residentially stable rural population that makes rituals here distinct. Rituals in Ngqushwa involve the work of instructing a specially constituted group of people, one that is ordinarily dislocated and fragmented, on how they should act towards one another. Rituals also do the work of defining and redefining kinship, clanship and neighbourliness – in short, community – in relation to the past, the present and the future.

There is a further angle to this notion of 'ritual as work party'. As slaughter rituals have become more elaborate and costly, it has become necessary to engage other households in their preparation. Both the costs and the labour required to host what many rural people regard as important slaughter rituals are increasingly difficult for individual homesteads to fund and organise alone. This is particularly so for funerals which, by their nature, can seldom be planned in advance and can attract people from far and wide. In the village context, this makes the actual work of hosting

rituals a necessarily co-operative undertaking by local and even town-based people (most of them women) who are assembled for the task of successfully planning and undertaking all the preparations for the ritual.

The frequent enlisting of local kinswomen and neighbours from poorer households to help with the preparations for a ritual plays an important role in both recognising and subverting economic (and class) distinctions between individuals and households. By enlisting the unpaid help of neighbours, it could be said that wealthier host *imizi* are exploiting their labour in pursuit of conspicuous consumption for their own benefit. However, such co-operation not only provides valuable opportunities for women to work together (both intensively and on a relatively equal footing), but also affords them opportunities, through their conversations and interactions over the course of several days, to exchange information, to discuss local problems and to mull over the stories and scandals that have come to light in other villages or in 'town'. In this way, they actively share and reconstitute common, locally informed understandings of social practice, all the while strengthening networks of mutual support across the very real cleavages of socioeconomic difference, both within the village and between town and village-based women. Thus ritual 'work parties' serve as important sites of sociality by providing the space (especially for women) to socialise and to work together (cf. Hughes-Freeland & Crain 1998: 6).

The presence and participation of other villagers at a ritual is no small matter either. Critically, other villagers are implicated in many of the ritual practices of each homestead in the village. Important to the success of the ritual are the contributions of alcohol and money from extended family members, from *imigalelo* (credit clubs), and, in the case of funerals, from burial societies. *Imigalelo*, virtually the exclusive preserve of women, are prominent during particular phases of rituals.

Key principles with regard to the role of other villagers during rituals are those of *ukuzimasa* (to participate) and *ukungqina* (to witness), which means to endorse and to legitimise the ritual by attending the event and – crucially through commensality – by consuming some of the drink and food prepared for the occasion. Witnessing involves listening to the male host's (sometimes cryptic) explanation of what event has given rise to the ritual and giving a formal response to this explanation. This response is given by the most senior man present who is not related to the host *umzi*.

Through their attendance and participation, non-kin local people thus contribute to 'building the homestead' by recognising (at times begrudgingly) the host homestead (and its ancestors) as one of their own, legitimising its members and their activities, and bearing witness to its ritual and moral projects (cf. Wilson et al. 1952: 206). For this reason, neighbours and other villagers are not expressly invited to a ritual; they are simply expected to attend. The offerings of *mqombothi* and meat, besides their ritual purpose, are a means of encouraging attendance by other people who are not involved in the work of organising and hosting the ritual. Critically, it is the attendance by large numbers of other people (especially members of 'respectable' local families and town-based people) that provides the sought-after 'noise'

generated when many people socialise together. This 'noise' is an indication of the status of the host *umzi* and shows the ancestors that the host homestead is respected and being 'built' by the entire village. In contrast, the clearest sign of a socially marginal homestead is the small number of people, and the virtual absence of non-kin people, at the rituals they host.

A short case study of ritual practice in Hobana Village

None of the above should be taken to suggest that the hosting of rituals among Xhosa-speaking rural people is timeless and unchanging, since (as I have argued above) it clearly is not (Wilson 1978). Indeed, ritual hybridisation and innovation, as well as contingent adjustments, are all in evidence here (Mtuze 2003: 88ff). As Bell (1997: 256) suggests, what people do ritually and regard as tradition is 'usually a rather new synthesis of custom and accommodation' (see White 2011).

Building the homestead in a resource-poor rural environment requires the continued flow and investment of material resources, people and information from the town to rural villages. The sprucing up of the homestead (additional building, renovating and painting) prior to hosting a ritual is a clear, if superficial, expression of this investment. Building the home also requires maintaining relationships between kin and wider social networks and between town and country, thereby ensuring that one's rituals are well attended. In the village context, building the home requires engaging one's neighbours in co-operative projects. This is because Xhosa people say that '*akukho isiko elinakho kuqhubeka abantu bengekho*' (if there are no people present, a ritual cannot proceed/succeed).[10] These days, such projects place an emphasis on the display, sharing and highly repetitive consumption of the same, specified material resources. As recurring consumptive events, rituals fulfil this role well. The only households that seldom conduct rituals (other than funerals that few people attend) are those that constitute the 'very poor'.[11]

A significant number of homesteads in Hobana are involved in conducting or materially supporting a wide range of rituals in their respective villages and beyond. While many of these rituals exhibit a dominant Christian character, some indicate the continued relevance of ancestor veneration (Mtuze 2003: 84; cf. Pauw 1974: 433, 436–437). Indeed, Pauw (1974: 437–438) discusses the complementarity, or at least the lack of conceptual conflict, that exists between Christian and 'traditional' religious or ritual practices. The most important of the ancestor rituals, from the point of view of my informants (both men and women) in Hobana, are mortuary rituals. Besides the actual funeral, the two main mortuary rituals that involve the

10 This is as true today as when it was first told to Mills in Wilson et al. (1952: 206).

11 Poor families spending a fortune on lavish funerals, *Daily Dispatch*, 6 September 2003. This article details the 'enormous pressure' on families 'to give their loved ones a decent send-off … Two new studies revealed that low income families were splurging an average of three-and-a-half times their total monthly incomes on funerals'.

ancestors are *ukukhapa* (to accompany) and *ukubuyisa* (to bring home). Both of these relate to the death of the male (and only the male) homestead head and are generally not conducted openly by Christian families. I found that Christian belief did not always mean that people felt barred from conducting the rituals that are specifically linked to the ancestors, just that they had to finesse their reasons for doing so. However, for the members of some denominations (notably the Seventh Day Adventists), hosting slaughter rituals is unacceptable (see below).

The rituals that people perform include the slaughter rituals that mark rites of passage (especially the rather fraught male circumcision ritual – see Kepe 2010) or other stages in the life cycle of individuals, and beer-drinks through which people communicate with their ancestors, mark transitions in their lives or 'just socialise' with their neighbours (cf. Hammond-Tooke 1985: 55). Other 'feasts' and ceremonies such as weddings, graduation parties and the unveiling of gravestones are generally the preserve of a far smaller group of wealthier households. Here, the norm is to slaughter a cow or ox (and sometimes one or more sheep) to 'feed the people' (that is, without an express or explicit invocation of the patrilineal ancestors). While they are not strictly ancestor rituals, these ceremonies nevertheless follow much the same pattern in terms of a gendered and generational mobilisation and division of labour during the preparatory, performative and consumptive phases of the ritual. Also, it is worth noting that not all rituals specifically require cattle to be slaughtered in order to communicate with the ancestors. Beer-drinks are also ritual occasions where, for a variety of reasons, supplication of the ancestors is sought. Also, people adapt the actual performance of normative ritual practices to what is affordable and manageable at the current time; as long as this is communicated to the ancestors during proceedings, all should be well (cf. White 2011). Furthermore, most rural people readily accept that different clans and families have slightly different ritual practices and ways of conducting what is a common set of rituals. Needless to say, there is no textbook that lists the precise procedures that should be followed during rituals. Rather, older people (specifically older men) are the repositories of knowledge about how the family rituals should be performed (Wilson 1978: 158).

My research points to an increase in the number of rituals that younger, employed women are instigating these days by, for example, dreaming of their ancestors who claim to be thirsty or by organising a beer-drink to thank their ancestors for their success in securing employment. Once their families have agreed to host a ritual, these women often take the lead in the preparations and purchases for, and the hosting of, the rituals (especially beer-drinks, but also slaughter rituals).[12] Bank (2002: 648) observed a similar pattern in Mooiplaas Location near East London and has argued that by taking the lead in ritual and custom, '[Xhosa] women are seeking to authenticate their new-found material power by embedding it in a deeper

12 Xhosa people speak of their rituals as 'work', translating directly from the word *umsebenzi*. In the real sense in which they are the 'work of/for the ancestors' and not entertainment or feasting, they are indeed work.

set of meanings, values and activities that increasingly locate [these women] at the social centre of the community.' Women must, however, still defer to a male relative since a senior man must conduct the ancestral invocation; communicate with the people assembled for the ritual; lead the men who will conduct the actual slaughter, butchering of the carcass, and the cooking, carving up and allocation of the meat as well as of the beer and brandy.

While recognising that women and young people increasingly contest the dominance of senior men in ritual practice, we should take care to delineate the limits of this: we should ask *which* women are involved, and in relation to *which aspects and types* of ritual practice such challenges occur. I suggest that we should be careful not to lump all women together, not least because this downplays important social differences that exist between women, such as differences in age, marital status, kinship affiliation in relation to the ritual at hand, their main or current place of residence (rural or urban), and their social standing in other ways. Similarly, economic standing (centred on educational and employment status) and religious affiliation[13] are important in plotting the different roles that women are able to play in the context of ritual and in social life more generally. We thus need to clearly delineate and assess the different trajectories of change and upward mobility – and indeed increasing impoverishment – between women. Many, if not all, of these social differences must also be applied to a nuanced analysis of the role of men in ritual.

More than 103 separate rituals and ceremonies were held in Hobana Village during the 12-month period from November 2000 to October 2001.[14] This means that a significant proportion of the homesteads in the village hosted a ritual in that time. Clearly, however, not every household conducted a ritual during the year in question. In fact, since some rituals commonly take place in succession, in a number of instances it was the same subset of households that was responsible for organising a particular sequence of rituals that were explicitly linked to each of their own preceding rituals.[15] These rituals ranged from only brewing *mqombothi* to the slaughter of an animal, the provision of *mqombothi* and brandy, and the preparation and consumption of other food. Certain rituals had the appearance of discrete occasions, but were in fact linked to other rituals that had been conducted before and still other rituals that were scheduled to follow. The rituals conducted in Hobana included 28 different types of ritual (or distinct phases of a 'multistage' ritual), with the most commonly held ancestor rituals centred on the complex of mortuary rites, including *imingcwabo* (funerals), and the *ukukhapa* and *ukubuyisa* ancestor rituals

13 Many churches were represented in Hobana: prominent among these were the Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Bantu Church of Christ, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist and a number of 'African independent' churches.

14 Hobana had 245 *occupied* households at the time. Since part of these data relied on the recollections of my informants, it is likely that a few rituals were not recorded.

15 Given the cost of rituals, there is a correlation between the frequency with which a homestead hosts rituals and its economic standing.

mentioned above (see Mtuze 2003: 25). Other rituals that were part of this complex were *ukutshayelela inkundla* (to sweep the courtyard), *ukunxiba/ukukulula izila* (to wear/remove mourning clothes) and *ukucitha impahla* (to disperse the clothes of the deceased). These various rituals associated with mortuary rites took place on 29 different occasions during the 12-month period. Other rituals, which usually involved only the brewing of *mqombothi* and the consumption of brandy, included *ukuphuma* (to come out/to graduate), which informed the wider community about a particular person's change in social status, *ukwazisa* (to make a new home known to the ancestors and community), *ukuvula' mzi* (to open a new home), *umtshato* and *umendo* (wedding ceremonies) and *ukucitha iintsimbi* (to cast aside the beads of an ancestor who was a diviner).

In 43 of the 103 rituals I recorded, the ritual consisted of only the provision of *mqombothi* and brandy (and generally some bottled lager as well). This meant that 42% of all the rituals did not involve the slaughter of an animal.

Of the 29 rituals conducted in Hobana during which at least one cow or ox was slaughtered during the 12-month period in question, 14 (or 48%) involved mortuary rituals. Nine of the 14 mortuary rituals were funerals, comprising a Christian service with a cow or ox slaughtered on the pretext of 'feeding the mourners' present. On 2 separate occasions, 2 cows were slaughtered for this purpose – such were the numbers of people who attended the funeral. Seven of the 9 funerals held over the period recorded were to bury elderly women and 2 were for men (one of these was a man in his early 40s). The remaining 5 rituals that involved slaughtering an ox comprised the ancestor rituals *ukukhapa* (2 occasions) and *ukubuyisa* (3 occasions), which were hosted by widows for their deceased husbands.

People in rural Ngqushwa Municipality undoubtedly place great emphasis on mortuary rituals, whether these are done in terms of Christian burials or more 'traditional' Xhosa burial rites, or commonly as a hybrid of these two forms. Funerals are important social occasions and people attend from far and wide. The funeral of an elderly person from a well-known family might be attended by a few hundred people and involve considerable expense for the bereaved family. This has given rise to an industry in which funeral policies and membership of local burial societies provide some financial security and solace to the bereaved family, and have come to feature prominently in the livelihood decisions and social activities of many households (see Lee 2011).

There is a widespread preference for burying deceased family members in their home villages wherever this is possible and practicable, even if they have spent most of their adult lives living away from the village. The village is where their ancestors are believed to reside, specifically in the kraal of their home *umzi*, and this is where their cultural roots are. This practice makes funerals an especially important element in the transfer of building materials, foodstuffs and money from towns to the countryside – and gives rise to the movement of large numbers of people between town and countryside every weekend.

Summary

The contemporary salience of ritual practice as people's central means of communicating with their patrilineal ancestors – and, crucially, with one another – is apparent everywhere in rural Ngqushwa Municipality. I have suggested that, at least in part because of the widening socioeconomic differences and economic uncertainty both within the village and between town/city and countryside, rural people's commitment to conducting a wide range of rituals appears to be virtually unassailable for the foreseeable future. The very activities and processes involved in planning, organising and co-operating to successfully host rituals are key sites for negotiating the tensions and reconstituting the moral and material relations within and between the dislocated members of homesteads in villages across the province (Ngwane 2003; Ngwenya 2002).

And so to conclude, gender relations and family life in rural Ngqushwa Municipality are not imploding across the board but are undeniably fraught. This is not new: social relations (including marriage) have been unsettled since at least the 1950s, in response to broader changes in the economy and political landscape of the country and countryside (Mager 1998; Morrell 2001). One of the significant ways in which women currently seek to deal with profound changes in the status of men is to be far more selective in the relationships they build and seek to sustain with the significant men in their lives. An increasing number of women appear to be steadily erasing men from their more feminised, co-operative social spaces and networks. Female-centred, multigenerational families headed by women and women assuming greater control of associations and local organisations are further indications of such changes.

The many and varied future implications of these changes are not clear, but the searing gender-based violence that characterises the rural Eastern Cape Province is evidence that the patriarchal order – personified and carried forward by younger men – is fighting a desperate rearguard action. This violence will likely succeed only in further alienating many women from their menfolk. As men and women, young and old, drift apart, not least through the development of new settlements of 'matchbox' houses that are not homesteads in the normative sense, it is rituals as significant sites of social interaction and contestation that still bring the genders and generations together in highly charged, vital spaces.

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