

**Shared Secrets – Concealed Sufferings: Social Responses to the  
AIDS Epidemic in Bushbuckridge, South Africa**

**by**

**Jonathan James Stadler**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree**

**PhD**

**In the Department of Anthropology at the**

**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

**SUPERVISOR: Fraser McNeil**

**August 2011**



**Statement by Candidate**

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree D.Phil. (Anthropology) at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at another university. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with University requirements. I am aware of University policy and implications regarding plagiarism.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** 25 August 2011



## **Dedication**

To my wife Conny for inspiration, insight, and encouragement, and our daughter  
Carla, for distraction and joy

## Abstract

From the early 1990s, rates of HIV infection increased dramatically in South Africa and by the early 2000s, AIDS emerged as the main cause of death for adult South Africans. During the first half of the 2000s, the South African government's response to this crisis was inadequate, marked by denial and delays in implementing prevention and treatment, resulting in thousands of preventable deaths. Yet, apart from the challenges posed by the predominantly urban-based Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the absence of a social response to this crisis is notable, especially in rural settings.

This scenario forms the broad backdrop to this ethnographic study that draws on participant observation and interviews undertaken over a three-year period (2002-2005) in KwaBomba village previously in the Gazankulu Homeland, now located in the Bushbuckridge municipality of the South African lowveld. An ethnographic perspective provides an intimate vantage point from which to view peoples' experiences of the AIDS epidemic and their responses in context. This perspective draws attention to gaps in public health and biomedical understandings of the epidemic and suggests alternatives to these understandings.

In Bushbuckridge, mortality and morbidity due to AIDS became visible in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Households were incapable of dealing with the burden of illness and death while the health services were often unwilling and ill-prepared. HIV prevention campaigns based on individual behaviour change were not well suited to a context in which HIV spread through sexual networks. Despite widespread awareness of the threat of AIDS, the disease was subjected to public censorship and AIDS suffering was

concealed. Public discourses of AIDS were hidden within gossip and rumour and articulated as witchcraft suspicions and accusations. Although these discourses appear to deny and suppress the reality of AIDS, I suggest that they are active attempts to deal with the AIDS crisis: gossip and rumour allocate blame and construct a local epidemiology through which the epidemic can be surveilled; interpreting AIDS as witchcraft creates the possibility of avenging untimely death. These discursive forms are critical in informing individual and social responses to the AIDS epidemic. While the absence of public acknowledgement of AIDS as a cause of illness and death suggests denial and fatalism and appears to limit public action, subaltern discourses create shared secrets to manage the AIDS epidemic at the local level. Furthermore, these discourses may constitute a form of resistance against biomedical models of causality.

Ethnographic enquiry at the local level offers a nuanced understanding of social responses to the AIDS epidemic. By examining forms of expression that lie outside the domain of public health, the thesis reveals how these constitute significant forms of social action in response to the epidemic.

**Key Words:** Ethnography, HIV/AIDS, lowveld, history, sexual networks, secrecy, gossip and rumour, witchcraft, social suffering, antiretrovirals

## Acknowledgements

Ethnographic fieldwork relies heavily on the generosity of others. I was very fortunate to work in an area of South Africa where customary hospitality is still practiced despite a history of political oppression, poverty and violence. Although my research focussed on ordinary people, the people I met were extraordinary in their resilience to hardship and their capacity to endure suffering. I am extremely grateful to those who welcomed me into their homes and lives and offered me their stories and also their friendship.

Accommodation in the lowveld was rented from the Wits Rural Facility. Kevin Mitchell and Sharon Pollard, and the Mathebula family, fed me and let me use their homes as my own. I am especially grateful to NwaZakaria Mathebula for her hospitality; I was almost a permanent fixture under a tree in her yard during hot summer days and her hut when it rained.

This thesis is my sole responsibility. However, I could not have conducted my research without the assistance of my excellent guides and interpreters. David Mkantshwa, Godfrey Ndlovu, and Council Mgiba, are patient, respectful, gentle-men who guided my research and with whom I became good friends, despite our differences in opinions and the stressful task of interpreting my complex research needs. Thank you to Conny Stadler for checking the XiTsonga grammar and spelling.

I am extremely grateful to the following institutions for their financial support of my research, without which I would have incurred much financial debt: The University of Pretoria (post-graduate student merit award); the Centre for the Study of AIDS in Africa;

the A C Mellon Foundation (post-graduate mentorship award). Doing fieldwork and later writing up the thesis took me away from my full-time job with the Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit (RHRU) in Johannesburg. The management of the RHRU granted me study leave to complete my research and write.

Earlier drafts of chapters were presented at seminars at the departments of anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand and University of Pretoria, the Centre for the Study of AIDS, the RHRU, and at the following conferences: the Association for Anthropology in Southern Africa (Grahamstown, 2003), Sex and Secrecy (Johannesburg, 2003), the Social Aspects of HIV and AIDS Research Conference (Pretoria, 2003), the AIDS Impact Conference (Marseille, 2007), and the International Union Against Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Cape Town, 2009).

Many individuals offered their support and critical commentary at different stages of this project: Charles van Onselen, David Copland, Robert Thornton, Carol Taylor, Eirik Saethre, Jon Sharp, Johan Kriel, Mary Crewe, Frederic Le Marcis, Charles Dugmore, and Peter Delius. Isak Niehaus accompanied me on my long journey from undergraduate student to doctoral candidate and whose passion for anthropology inspired me. Thank you to Rehana Ebrahim-Vally for picking up where Isak left off and to Fraser McNeil and Innocent Pikirayi for assisting me in the final days of submission.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without mentioning Kally Shokane, a man of intellect and a wicked sense of humour, whose passing I will always regret. Finally, my parents Alf and Jenny have always encouraged my academic

endeavours and expressed their interest in my work, although as Alf told me on more than one occasion: ‘a good thesis is a finished thesis’.



## Acronyms

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ANC: African National Congress

ARV: Antiretroviral

DoH: Department of Health (South Africa)

ELM: Ethel Lucas Memorial Hospitals

HAART: Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HSDU: Health Systems Development Unit

IPHC: International Pentecostal Holiness Church

MRC: Medical Research Council (South Africa)

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

NRCC: Nazarene Revival Crusade Church

OPD: Out Patients Department

PEPFAR: Presidential Emergency Funds for AIDS Relief

PHRU: Perinatal HIV Research Unit

RHRU: Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit

PMTCT: Prevention of Mother To Child Transmission

SANT: South African Native Trust

STD/I: Sexually Transmitted Disease/Infection

TAC: Treatment Action Campaign

TB: Tuberculosis

TGME: Transvaal Gold Mining Estates

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

VCT: Voluntary Counselling and Testing



WHO: World Health Organisation

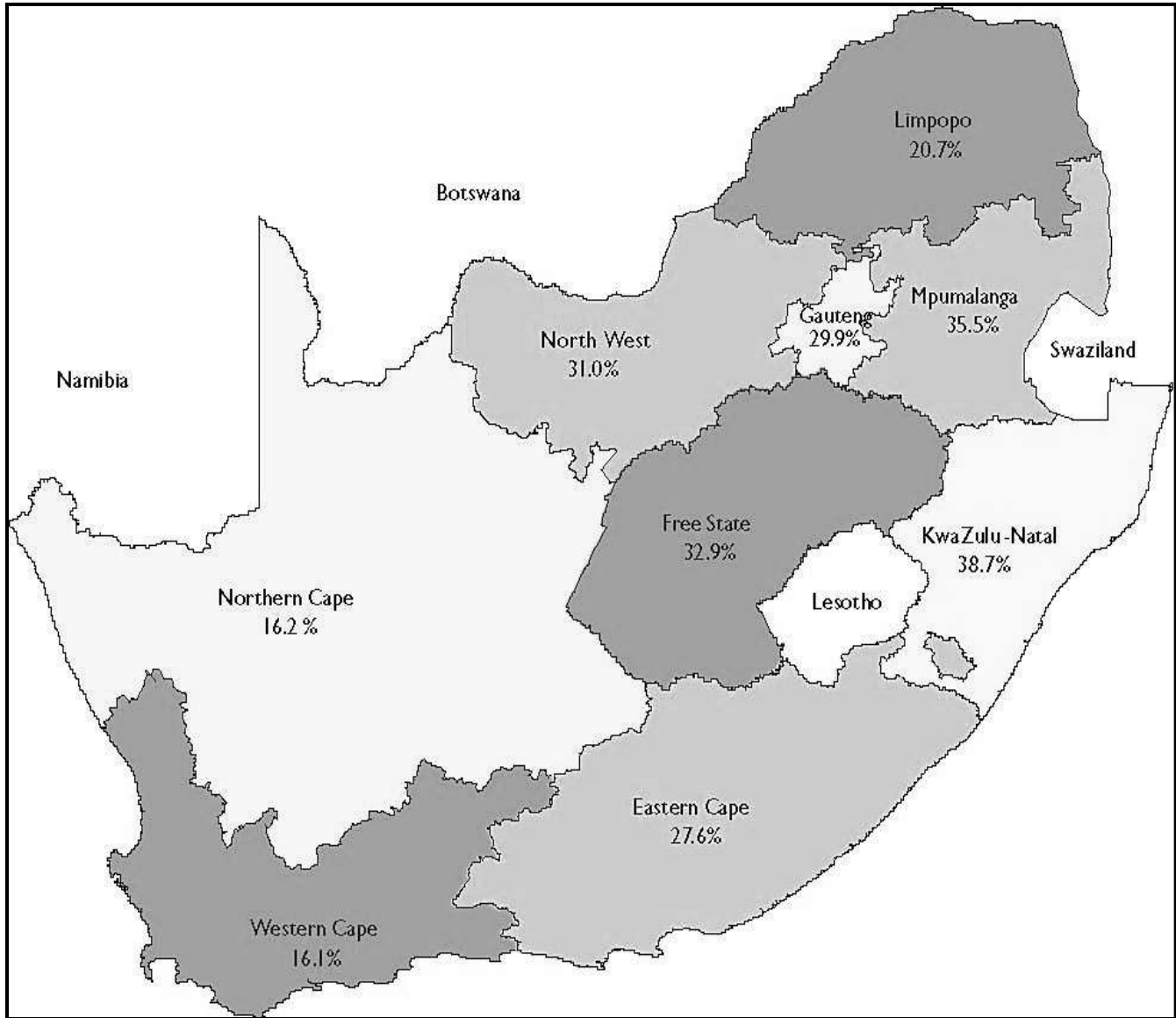
WRF: Wits Rural Facility

ZCC: Zion Christian Church

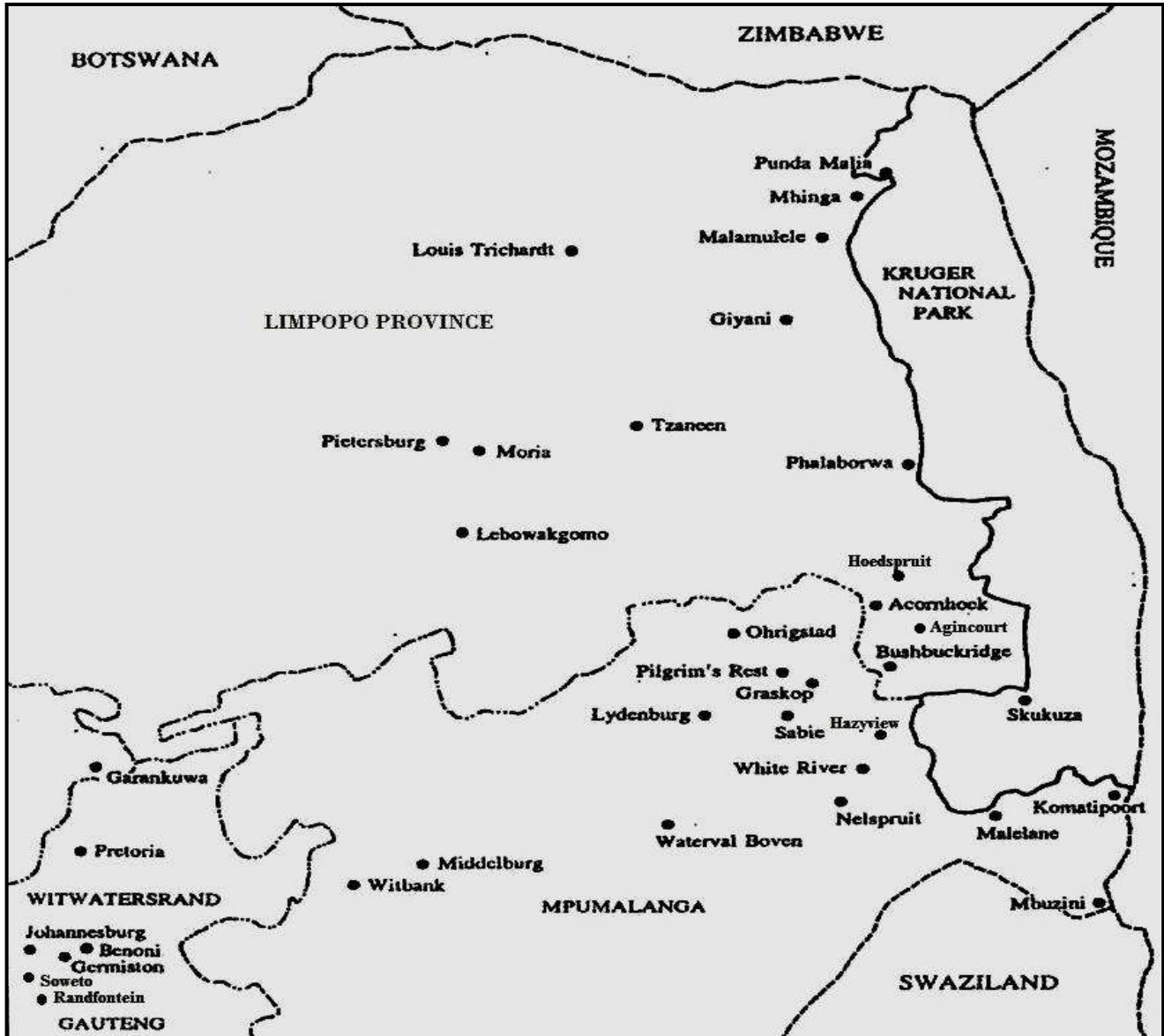
## MAPS



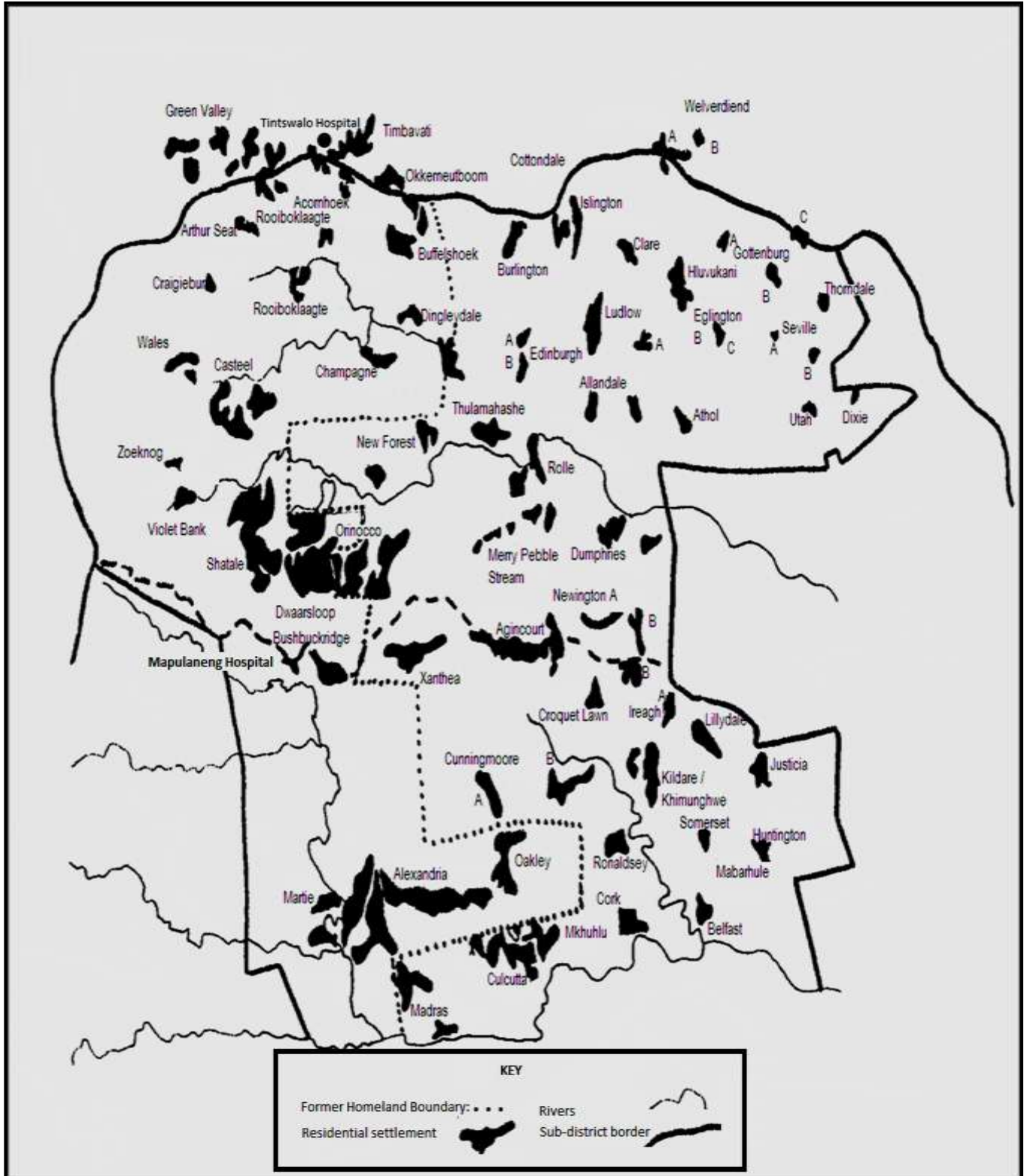
**Map 1: South Africa's Limpopo Province, showing Bushbuckridge**



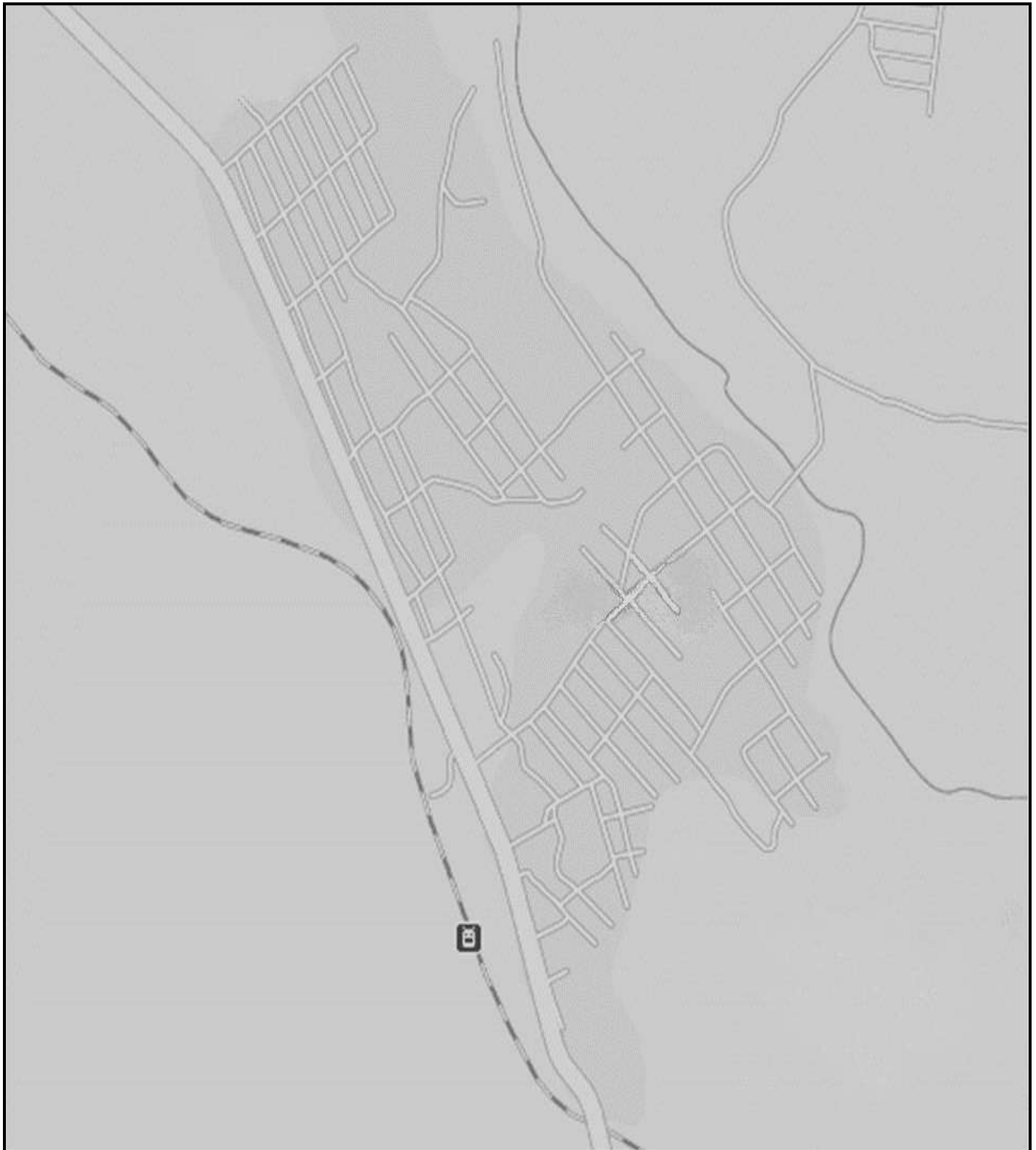
**Map 2: HIV Prevalence Map of South Africa (Department of Health 2006)**



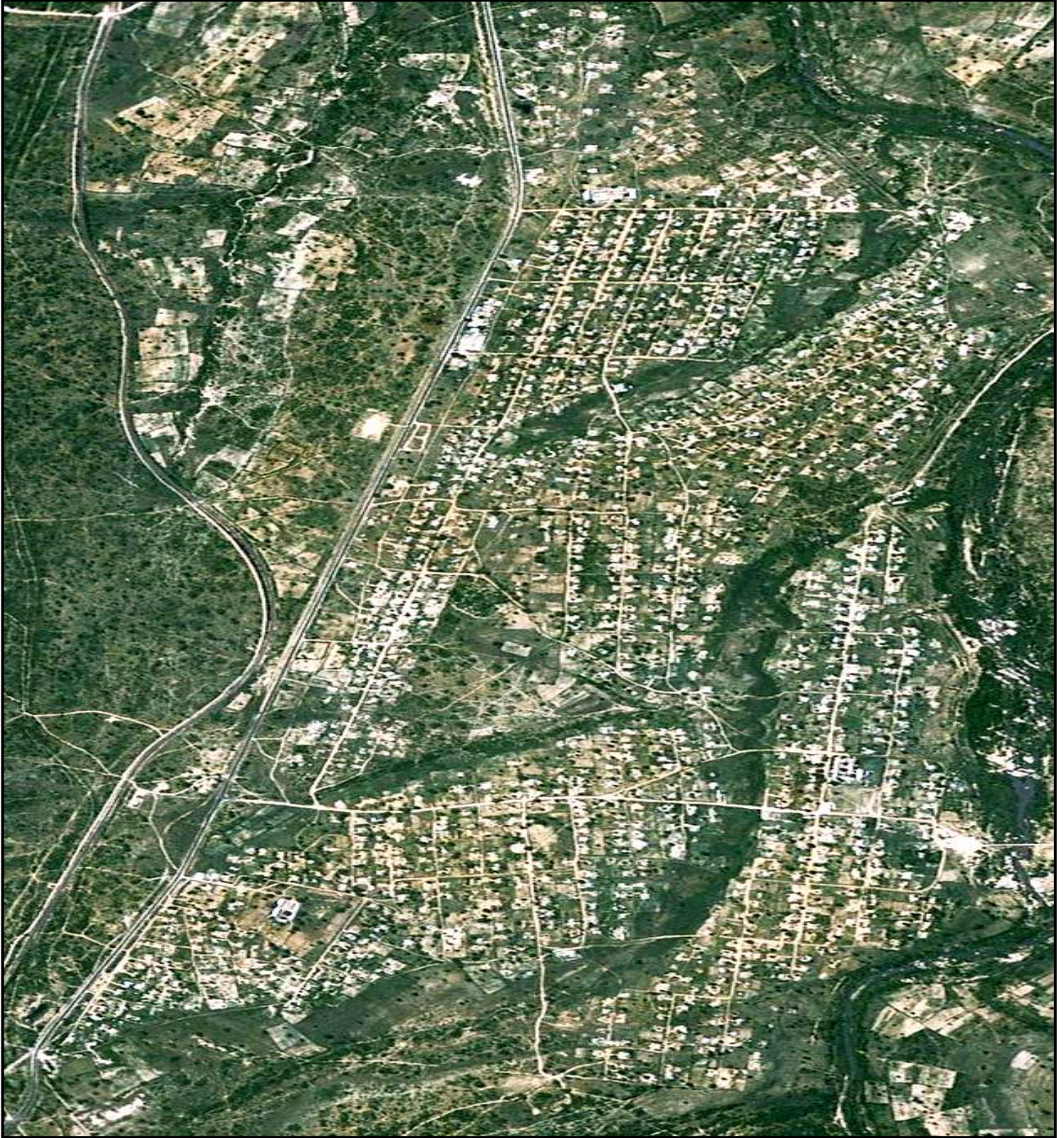
Map 3: Places referred to in the text



Map 4: The villages and towns of Bushbuckridge



**Map 5: Street level map of the study site**



**Map 6: Satellite image of study site (Source: Google Earth)**



## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>ACRONYMS</b> .....	<b>VI</b>
<b>MAPS</b> .....	<b>VIII</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>XIV</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>XVII</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>XVII</b>
<b>LIST OF PICTURES</b> .....	<b>XVII</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b> .....	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>Three funerals and a party</i> .....	1
<i>The paradox of AIDS in South Africa: denial, fatalism and culture</i> .....	7
<i>AIDS in Bushbuckridge</i> .....	18
<i>Doing ethnography in an epidemic</i> .....	23
<i>Organization of the thesis</i> .....	41
<i>End Notes</i> .....	44
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b> .....	<b>46</b>
ORIGINS: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE AIDS EPIDEMIC.....	46
<i>A tale of two epidemics</i> .....	48
<i>The research setting: Bushbuckridge</i> .....	54
<i>Sexuality in the era of agriculture (1913-1960)</i> .....	58
<i>Resettlement, wage labour and poverty (1960-1994)</i> .....	71
<i>The early 1990s: youth and sexual liberation</i> .....	74

<i>The arrival of AIDS (1990 – 2005)</i> .....	77
<i>Experiencing AIDS awareness</i> .....	85
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	93
<i>End Notes</i> .....	94
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b> .....	<b>101</b>
INFECTIONS: THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF SEXUAL RELATIONS .....	101
<i>Play, Romance and Sugar Daddies: from childhood to young adulthood</i> .....	104
<i>Transactional Relationships</i> .....	122
<i>The marriage process</i> .....	128
<i>Going Outside the Homestead: Extra-Marital Relations</i> .....	134
<i>Casual Sexual Relationships</i> .....	139
<i>Sexual Networks of Infection</i> .....	141
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	145
<i>End Notes</i> .....	147
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b> .....	<b>149</b>
SECRETS: REVEALING AND CONCEALING AIDS.....	149
<i>'AIDS is death': constructs of a new disease</i> .....	154
<i>Secrecy and suspicion</i> .....	157
<i>Dangerous knowledge</i> .....	164
<i>Shy men and Suffering women</i> .....	167
<i>Containing the AIDS body</i> .....	173
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	178
<i>End Notes</i> .....	179
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b> .....	<b>183</b>
EVIDENCE: ACCOUNTING FOR THE EXISTENCE OF AIDS.....	184
<i>Gossip, rumour and AIDS</i> .....	185



<i>Gossip and rumour: local perspectives</i> .....	188
<i>Constructing a popular epidemiology of AIDS in KwaBomba</i> .....	192
<i>Women who buy their own coffins</i> .....	199
<i>Infected condoms and dying with others</i> .....	202
<i>Rumour and Moral Panics</i> .....	204
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	209
<i>End Notes</i> .....	211
<b>CHAPTER SIX</b> .....	<b>213</b>
REVENGE: RECASTING AIDS AS WITCHCRAFT .....	213
<i>Witchcraft as an analogy for AIDS</i> .....	217
<i>Secrecy and desire: narratives of AIDS and witchcraft</i> .....	223
<i>AIDS as a kind of witchcraft</i> .....	228
<i>Avenging AIDS: combating witchcraft</i> .....	234
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	242
<i>End Notes</i> .....	243
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN</b> .....	<b>245</b>
SUFFERING: BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF ILLNESS AND DEATH .....	245
<i>Solomon and Pinkie</i> .....	250
<i>Khayellhle Mhlanga</i> .....	261
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	276
<i>End Notes</i> .....	277
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT:</b> .....	<b>279</b>
CONCLUSIONS .....	279
<i>AIDS in the treatment era</i> .....	280
<i>End Notes</i> .....	290

## List of Tables

Table 1: Interviews conducted in KwaBomba, 2003-2005 .....	32
Table 2: Reported AIDS deaths according to the year of death .....	78
Table 3: Reported AIDS deaths according to gender, age, occupation and year of death .....	79
Table 4: Summary table of the demographics of reported AIDS deaths .....	80
Table 5: Moses' sexual biography .....	119
Table 6: Ntwanano's sexual biography .....	196
Table 7: Deaths in the Mzimba Family .....	237
Table 8: Solomon's consultations with healers.....	257

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Cartoon on the death of ANC Youth League president Peter Mokaba (Shapiro 2002). .....	19
Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of a sexual network .....	142
Figure 3: Diagram of a sexual network showing the three main network hubs.....	144
Figure 4: Kinship diagram for Pinkie and Solomon.....	251
Figure 5: Kinship diagram of the Mhlangas .....	262

## List of Pictures

Picture 1: Youth pose under a <i>loveLife</i> Billboard in Acornhoek (Photo: Asa Walhstrom) .....	98
Picture 2: Young boys chill in the <i>loveLife</i> Y-Centre (Photo: Asa Wahlstrom) .....	98
Picture 3: The marching band pose with wooden AK-47s at World AIDS Day (Photo: Jonathan Stadler).....	99
Picture 4: Boxes of condoms on display at World AIDS Day (Photo: Jonathan Stadler) .....	99

**Picture 5: The *loveLife* / *Earthship* visits Acornhoek (Photo: Asa Wahlstrom) .....100**

**Picture 6: World AIDS Day, 2002 (Photo: Jonathan Stadler) .....100**

**Picture 7: Mourners hasten to the graveyard – heads covered to show respect (Photo: Jonathan Stadler).....182**

**Picture 8: The hearse leaves the mortuary (Photo: Jonathan Stadler).....183**

**Picture 9: Witnessing a burial (Photo: Jonathan Stadler) .....183**



Figure 1: Cartoon on the death of ANC Youth League president Peter Mokaba (Shapiro 2002).