

Figure 21: An offer of *ubuganu* (Marula beer) to the ancestors, South African borderland, 2001



Photograph by Callie Pretorius

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **DISPLACEMENT, TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES AND THE SPIRITS OF THE ANCESTORS**

Ancestral rights were significant because of the traditions that linked lineage and ancestral rights to specific land(s). One's ancestors came to life in the land, ensuring the right of their descendants to life and work the land, and ensuring fecundity. Living on someone else's land meant that *deslocados* either lived without the protection of their ancestors or, if they chose to perform ceremonies to bring the protective spirits of their ancestors with them, lived on land under the rule of someone else's ancestral lineage. Many people told stories of becoming sick because their ancestors fought with the ancestors who had historical rights to the land, the former hating to succumb to the domination of the latter.

Nordstrom (1997:120).

In this chapter I concur with Boddy (1994:427) that spirit possession is about much more than the mere metaphysical. The multiplicity of identities in the borderlandscape finds resonance in the spirit-world. Possession by an alien spirit is a social phenomenon that creates unity, through real and imaginative ties of kinship, between people on opposite sides of the border. I analyse 'cross-border' spirit possession and illustrate how this is used to cement and establish unity in the borderlandscape, through real and imaginative ties of kinship.

In the sections below I consider how the union between the living and dead members of society can be broken through displacement and sustained through the existence of territorial boundaries separating people from their ancestors and ancestral land(s). During the Mozambican war of the 1970s and 1980s thousands of refugees fled to South Africa, leaving their ancestors behind. These refugees used various means to relocate their ancestors across the international boundary, thereby sustaining

the links between the living and the dead. To the extent that the ancestors are territorial, the link between people and their ancestors also symbolises and entrenches the link between people and their land. Others who fled the country left their ancestors behind, willingly and unwillingly. Some of these people devised ways of honouring their ancestors from across the border, while others, unable to keep the ties with their ancestors alive, suffered greatly due to this separation.

Apart from examining the obvious rupture in the union between the living and the dead with the displacement of people, I also analyse the possession of South Africans by spirits from Mozambique. People, especially healers, on the South African side of the border, claim that Ndauspeaking spirits of the Zambezi Province in Mozambique possess them and so establish common lineages between the people of KwaZulu Natal and Mozambique. In northern KwaZulu-Natal possession by these unfamiliar Ndauspirits increased during the 1970s and 1980s. As the ties between refugees and their familiar ancestral spirits were broken, many saw a linkage in Ndaupossession to their home country and kin.

Furthermore, healers in KwaZulu-Natal view possession by Ndauspirits as a blessing, since these spirits are judged as much more powerful than local ancestral spirits. Therefore, many healers in northern KwaZulu-Natal claim possession by a Ndauspirit as well as possession by a familiar ancestral spirit. I argue that this notion is connected to the general belief by residents of northern KwaZulu-Natal that healers and medicine from Mozambique are far superior to local medicines and that Mozambique is a more 'traditional' (*chintu*) country than South Africa and, therefore, is a place more 'in touch' with the ancestors.

Essentially then, this chapter is about the creation of unity and division, both ideologically and socially. At an ideological level territorial boundaries create

disunity between the world of the living and the world of the dead and confuse and distort peoples' ideas of life and afterlife. People who crossed the border during the war were prevented from communicating with the spirits of the dead and were unable to conduct 'traditional' rituals. On a social level, the rupture in relations between people and their ancestors, through whom they are linked to people across the border, creates disunion between people on opposite sides of the border.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section I discuss general characteristics of the cosmological beliefs of the people of the borderlandscape with particular reference to the spirits of the ancestors. In the second section I illustrate the dilemmas Mozambican refugees faced in the relationship between them and their ancestors when the ties between refugees and their land were severed. With the use of case-study material I illustrate the means people employed to overcome the physical division in space between them and the dwelling places of their ancestors. In the third section I look at the occurrence of, and belief in Ndaupossession in northern KwaZulu-Natal and how this possession is used to justify a common lineage between people in northern KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique.

### **Cosmological beliefs in the borderland**

The pre-colonial cosmological beliefs of people in the borderland are based on two pillars: belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and belief in the continuing involvement of their ancestors in their daily lives (Hammond-Tooke 1989). In pre-colonial times people did not worship the Supreme Being (*Unkulukhulu*). They remembered him as the creator of all things and the oldest ancestor of the community. However, since he is so old no one could remember his praises anymore and he

played virtually no role in the daily lives of his descendants (Junod 1962:368; Krige 1988:108).

Much more important and central in the lives of the borderlanders was the belief that the spirits of the ancestors (*amadlozi*) can affect the lives of the living. In the borderland people believe that human beings consist of three components: body (*umzimba*), soul or spirit (*idlozi*) and shadow (*isithunzi*). However, after the body dies, the shadow will ultimately become the spirit (Krige 1988: 283-284).<sup>1</sup> People believed that the spirits of the dead maintain an active interest and involvement in the lives of their descendents and can influence their lives in a positive or negative manner. It is important that balance and congenial relations be maintained between the living and dead members of the community and also between that which is visible and that which is invisible in their universe.

The ancestors generally play a protective role in the lives of their living relatives. In return they demanded to be looked after through various offerings and sacrifices. In the same way that living people depend on their ancestors for fortune in their lives, the ancestors depend on the sacrifices of their living relatives to live in the ancestor community. There is thus continuity between the community of those still living and those who have passed away.

Lan (1987) explains that death in African society can be compared to a weir in a river.

For a while the flow of life is held up. The current eddies round and round and streams back on itself as the processes of dying and burial get underway. But then the weir gates are winched open and the flow of life continues,

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<sup>1</sup> People refer to ancestral spirits interchangeably as spirits (*amadlozi*) and shadows or ghosts (*izinthunzi*). It is for this reason that Berglund (1975) prefers to call the ancestral spirits shades. When a person does not cast a long shadow people believe that he is weak and vulnerable to disease and misfortune. A dead body therefore does not cast a shadow because a person is buried with his shadow. After a person dies a ceremony (*ukubuyisa*) is held whereby his *isithunsi* becomes the *idlozi* and the person is taken up in the ancestral community (Clegg 1981; Krige 1988: 283-284).

though now on a different level (p.31).

In south-east Africa the realms of the living and the dead are inseparable and together these constitute peoples' social world. People carry their statuses and personalities with them when they die. Therefore, it is obvious that certain ancestor spirits are more important than others, in the same way that certain living people have a higher social ranking than others (Krige 1988: 283- 285).

My informants argued that venerating the ancestors was not so much a form of worship, but rather an attempt to communicate with deceased people who can still influence one's life. Having crossed the boundaries of life and death, the ancestors are closer, and in fact part of the powerful and mystical world of the spirits and the creator. This enables them to aid the living if they so desire.

Since the twentieth century people of the borderland distinguish between two distinct classes of spirits: the spirits of their own familiar ancestors and those of foreigners. Familiar spirits are usually benevolent protectors, but if their relatives neglect them, they may withdraw their protective support, thereby rendering people vulnerable to illness and misfortune. This can be corrected through appropriate ritual actions and is therefore not as serious as harm caused by witchcraft. It is therefore important to have a positive relationship with the ancestors, which is strengthened at every important occasion.

Throughout the borderland people venerate their own ancestors through specific rituals, called *ukupahla*. Most homesteads conduct the *pahla* rituals in a sacred place within the homestead. A shrine (*ingandelo*) is often constructed for honoring the ancestors at the stem of a marula tree (*Sclerocarya birrea*). In other instances people even construct special huts inside the homestead for the ancestors where they are looked after by their descendants, serving them daily with food and

drink. Veneration rituals differ relatively little from one place in the borderland to the other. A person may decide to *pahla* when illness or misfortune befalls him or her or a member of their family. Diviners often instruct people which ancestors have been neglected and should be honored. In most cases the eldest living male member of the homestead performs the ritual, although in particularly serious cases a diviner may be called to perform or oversee the ritual. Praises are recited for ancestors and some animal must usually be slaughtered. In the borderland, especially in Mozambique, it is usually a chicken or goat, since people do not keep large stock of cattle due to ecological and economic reasons. Only in extreme situations do people purchase cattle to appease the ancestors. In one case I recorded, Jabulane Mposa spent over R5, 000 on a *pahla* ritual. Jabulane told me that his ancestors abandoned him because shortly before his father passed away, he disobeyed his father by marrying someone whom his father disapproved. Jabulane became certain of the need to appease the spirits of his father's family when his wife died and he struggled to find employment.

Traditional sorghum beer (*utswala*) is also brewed in preparation for the *pahla* and gifts, such as sweets or the favorite foods of the ancestors are usually presented to them. To ensure the benevolence of the spirits the *pahla* must be performed to the exact specifications of the spirits as relayed through the eldest family member or through the diviner. If the spirits are content with the ritual they will aid their descendant(s). If not, further offerings must be made or another *pahla* organized.

The alien spirits are predominantly those of displaced Zulu people and of the Ndua people of the Zambezi Province in central Mozambique (see Chang 2001). Honwana (2002:72) argues that in the nineteenth-century interactions between Nguni, Ndaui, and Tsonga people gave rise to new categories of foreign spiritual beings that could be personally embodied. These spirits differ from the familiar spirits because

they possess only certain individuals. A person who has been possessed in this manner undergoes a period of apprenticeship where after he or she will act as a speaker on behalf of the spirit who possessed him or her. I discuss possession by foreign spirits in much more detail below. For now it is important to note that possession by alien spirits play a vital role in the cosmological beliefs of the people in the borderland.

Apart from the ancestors, diviners (*izinyanga* and *izangoma*) also play an important role in the cosmological beliefs of the residents of the borderland.

Diviners, like lineage heads often act as translators of the mysteries of the ancestral world. In veneration ceremonies they often interpret the wishes of the ancestors to their living relatives. During the Mozambican war diviners often fulfilled this role when families were broken up, or where lineage heads were killed and could not act as mediators between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

### **Displaced people and ancestors across the border**

Many informants who fled Mozambique during the war attribute their present-day misfortunes to their physical displacement, which severed them from the dwelling places of their ancestors. The international border and obstacles like landmines, bandits, border police and soldiers made it impossible for people to visit the graves of their ancestors to honour them. In some cases people tried to overcome this problem by relocating their ancestors, taking them with their ancestors to the places they fled to. This in itself brought about new problems. Nordstrom (1997:159) describes the manner in which the war disrupted the relationship between people and their ancestors in the following words:



Ancestors share the life-world of Mozambicans. They provide and protect; they punish when the living make mistakes; they counsel; they even eat, drink and enjoy a good joke. And they suffer the fates of war as do their living descendants. Properly ministered to, ancestors share fruitfully in their offsprings' lives. Their demands are not excessive. A proper funeral and burial, and fealty and respect shown in ongoing ceremonies for them in their "home-land" are the things that constitute wealth and peace of mind for the ancestors. To disregard an ancestor's wish is stupidity; to desert one a sin. People cannot, in good faith, leave their ancestors unattended in a land ravaged by violence. But if they invite their ancestors to relocate with them, they generally ensure their ancestors' unhappiness. Severed from their homeland, subordinate to the lineage of those controlling the new destination, shorn of normal family supports, the ancestors can bring turmoil, misfortune, and even death to the living. The ancestors, quite literally, can make life and death possible (p.159).

Some refugees who fled Mozambique during the war returned before 1992, risking the dangers of landmines and abductions by FRELIMO or RENAMO forces, not to mention the problems of crossing back into South Africa, to 'fetch' their ancestors. However, as Nordstrom (1997:159) states in the quotation above, relocating ancestors brings with it other problems and generally ensures their unhappiness. One informant related to me that, 'Every place has its own ancestor spirits who have lived there for many years. When one brings foreign spirits to that place it can cause problems.' He continued, 'Your ancestors are now strangers and no longer the owners of their own place.'

However, considering the alternative Mozambicans had during the war, which was to leave their ancestors behind unattended, it is understandable why people brought their ancestors to a foreign place, even if it meant that they have turned their ancestors into displaced refugees like themselves. Although many informants told me that Mozambicans brought their ancestors with them to South Africa during the war, I could only collect two cases where this actually happened. One of these cases is that of Russell Masinga who went to Mozambique during the war to bring his ancestors to live with his family in South Africa.

*Case 8.1. Russell Masinga fetches his ancestors in Mozambique*

Russell decided to fetch his ancestors from Mozambique after his two elder brothers died in KwaMshudu, in South Africa, during 1988. A diviner told Russell that he was next in line to die, because he and his brothers neglected their father's grave and did not venerate his spirit. Russell took white cloths and an empty Coca-Cola bottle to their old homestead at Gebeza, where his father and grandfather were buried. Risking the danger of being caught by soldiers operating in the area, he jumped the border at Muzi and travelled under the cover of night to the family's old homestead.

Russell laid the white cloths on the graves of his father and grandfather and asked them to get into those cloths and to come with him. He also put sand from the grave and from his grandfather's old house in the Coke bottle. When he returned to safety in South Africa, he put the sand at the stem of a marula tree in his homestead and laid the cloths over the branches of the tree. From then on that tree became the place where Russell and his younger brothers could go to speak to their forefathers.

During the Mozambican war refugees would also venerate the spirits of their ancestors in Mozambique at the international border. After a diviner instructed a person to venerate the spirits of his ancestors, that person and his/ her family would gather at the international border fence and call the ancestors to attend the ritual performed in their honour. Family members conducted the ritual, slaughtered and cooked two chickens or a goat, ate part of the meat, and hung the rest on the border fence for their ancestors. This was the closest many of them could get to the graves of their ancestors.

Most Mozambican refugees who settled in KwaZulu-Natal could only return to appease their ancestors after the war ended in 1992. This, for instance, was the case with Sam whose harrowing escape from the brutal war I discussed earlier.

*Case 8.2: Sam and Msongi's journey to bring back their father's spirit.*

After he had settled safely in South Africa, Sam stayed there until after the Mozambican war. In 1995 Sam and his older brother Msongi returned to Mozambique for the first time. Msongi's son had become terribly ill and the doctors in the hospital at Manguzi could not cure him. Msongi consulted a diviner about his son's sickness. The diviner told Msongi that his deceased father was 'calling him' and that he should visit the grave of his father in Catembe. Msongi asked Sam to accompany him.

This time they reported at the Farazela border post and crossed the border with South African passports. Sam told me that when they arrived in Catembe they were depressed to see how things had been destroyed during the war. They barely knew anyone who was still living there. Msongi slaughtered two chickens, which they bought at Catembe, at the place where his father's homestead used to be. The house was still standing, although it was in serious need of repair. After they had slaughtered the chicken, Msongi sprinkled beer on his father's grave and then he and Sam had some beer themselves. When the ritual was completed and Msongi was satisfied, he and Sam performed a second ritual of 'bringing back the spirit' (*ukubuyisa*) of their father. Msongi, who was the eldest brother, informed their father that his family now lived in South Africa and wanted him to return with them. Sam told me, 'The whole time Msongi was speaking in old Thonga'. They placed white

rags on his grave and asked him to enter the rags so that they can transport him to South Africa with them. More beer was then offered to the spirit of their father.

When they returned home, Sam and Msongi placed the white rags in the branches of a marula tree in Msongi's homestead. They then invited their relatives, the local chief and a prince (*umntwana*) of the Tembe royal council to a welcoming ritual for their father. Msongi's wife brewed sorghum beer in preparation for the ritual and Sam and Msongi purchased a goat and six chickens to be slaughtered. Eight days after returning from Mozambique Sam and Msongi performed the final phase of the *ukubuyisa* ritual by slaughtering the goat and chickens for their father and the people who had come to welcome him. From that moment onwards their father stayed at Msongi's homestead.

Informants told me that red cloths can also be used to transport the spirits of the ancestors. Another way of moving the *amadlozi* is with a branch of the *umphafa* (*Ziziphus mucronata*) tree (see Hutchings *et al.* 1996:193). During this ritual the family goes to the place where an ancestor was buried and holds a feast in his honour. They place a branch of the *umphafa* tree on the ancestor's grave and tell him to climb onto it. Once at the place they wish to relocate the ancestor, people will slaughter an animal, burn medicine, drink traditional beer and ask the spirit to settle there.

Although these trees often suffice as the place of venerating the ancestors, some people may even build special huts for the spirits of their ancestors. No living person lives in the hut. The family keeps the ancestor's personal belongings inside the hut, and enter only when they wish to communicate with the spirit.

Besson (2000) notes how people use emblems to symbolise the unity between them and their ancestors, and specific places. He reports that some Jamaican migrants

living in London place small sacks filled with Jamaican soil in their English homes. They usually take the soil from the house-yards in which the family dead are buried. This soil reproduces the felt connection between expatriate life and the active ancestral world that has only notionally been left behind (pp. 116-130). Similarly, Colson (1971:210-233) recorded rituals for relocating ancestral spirits almost identical to those performed by Mozambican refugees in exile amongst re-settled Gwembe families in Zimbabwe. Sakai (1997:50, 60-61) writes of the displaced Sumatran Gumai:

In order to maintain their affiliation with the ancestral place, the Jurai Tue brings a handful of soil and the trunk of an areca tree (*pinang*), both of which are planted in the centre of the new village... Failure to maintain ties is believed to infuriate the ancestral spirits and will cause misfortune against their descendants (Sakai 1997:50, 60-61).

Many Mozambican refugees in KwaZulu-Natal have to this day not been able to return to Mozambique, or, when they did, they could not find former homesteads and gravesites or did not know whether people were alive or dead, and, in the latter case, if they were buried at all. This happened to Jonas Tembe, the man whose life-history was narrated on pages 78-80.

*Case 8.3: Jonas Tembe's sacrifice in exile*

Jonas said that there had been many occasions when he wanted to *pahla*. At first it caused him great concern because he was scared of returning to Mozambique. He finally obtained *muti* (medicine/ a magical potion) from a healer in Manguzi that helped him. According to Jonas the healer told him to stay well away from the graves of the family with whom he was living in South Africa. Instead, he was to find a place in the bushes, where he was sure no one had been buried. There he had to burn

the medicine and recall the praise-names of his ancestors so that they could help him. Jonas says that he believes in these methods and that it has helped him in the past, although he still wishes he could return to his ancestors' gravesites one day.

Healers gave contradictory answers when I asked them whether it is necessary to *pahla* at the places where people died, or whether the ritual can be performed anywhere. Russell, in the case above, would certainly have been angry if, after he had crossed the border in 1988 into Mozambique, he had learned he could *pahla* at his house. A prominent healer in Manguzi told me that he could summon ancestral spirits from anywhere in the world. On his travels to Durban or Cape Town he always takes a special root with him. When he burns this root he recites the praise-names of his ancestors. The smoke from the burning root calls the ancestors to where he is and he does not need to go to them.

However, many informants I spoke with did not agree with this. According to them the ancestors are closely associated with particular places and it is always necessary to go to the place of the ancestors to *pahla*. One diviner explained that if a person fleeing from Mozambique knew the place where his ancestors had died, he/she needed to go there to *pahla*. If he/ she did not know the exact location or even if they were not sure whether a person had died, they can *pahla* in South Africa at their new home.

It is not only the distance between living and dead relatives that cause problems when a person needs to *pahla*, but also the distance between living members who have to be at the ritual. Apart from the diviner who usually accompanies people to the gravesites of their ancestors to *pahla*, it is usually also necessary for the oldest living member of a family to be present at the ritual. The oldest member knows the

ancestors more closely and is asked to speak to them on behalf of the afflicted family. He or she also helps the family decide what to bring to the *ukupahla* ritual. There are some general items like chickens or goats and traditional beer, but there are also articles which the ancestors preferred while they were still alive. These can include their favourite bottled beer, alcoholic spirits or even sweets or potato chips. The oldest member of the family knows which articles the ancestors would prefer.

Language can also play an important role. Those who fled Mozambique whilst they were youngsters and the children of refugees are sometimes unable to speak the languages of their ancestors. Most of the younger people who have grown up in South Africa have taken Zulu as their primary language. Zulu is a language foreign to their ancestors, who can only understand Thonga or Shangaan. Therefore it is necessary to have Thonga speakers at the *ukupahla* ritual to communicate with the ancestors.

During the war in Mozambique and even today people sometimes have to cross the international border to fetch older family members before they can *pahla*. In some cases young people have moved back to Mozambique after the war while their older relatives have stayed in South Africa and *vice versa*. For these people it is very necessary to locate and invite their older family members to *pahla* ceremonies if they wish them to be successful.

*Case 8.4: Rain-making Inside the Elephant Reserve.*

The intimate linkage between the ancestors and land and the need to venerate ancestors at their places of death was evident during the severe drought of 2002. In that year *Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife* allowed the Khumalo clan to cross

another impenetrable border - the Tembe Elephant Park fence - to perform an ancient rain-making ritual at their ancestral graves inside the game reserve.

In this case it was the fence of the nature reserve rather than the international border that caused displacement between people and their ancestors. However, in certain respects, the fence of the game park is more impenetrable than the international boundary. Many borderlanders view the fences of the Ndumo Game Reserve and Tembe Elephant Park, in similar ways to the fences that form the international border. Some of them attribute more negative connotations to these borders than they do to the international border.

However, the rains did not start to fall after the rainmaking ritual had been performed. People blamed the Khumalo family members who congregated inside Tembe Elephant Park, saying that they did not leave meat for the ancestors, but instead took it with them after they had finished eating.

At a typical rainmaking ritual people slaughter a cow, cook its meat and eat a part of it (usually as much as they can) at the gravesite. Large pots of sorghum beer and palm wine is also prepared for the ritual and drunk with the meat. When the congregants had finished eating the meat, they had to leave the leftover meat and beer for the ancestors. In this particular instance everybody in the community was asked to contribute to the purchase of the cow, since rain would benefit everyone. Observers told me that they saw those who performed the rainmaking ritual leave the Park with meat and that that was the reason why it failed to rain. The diviner who officiated at the ritual said that the rangers from Tembe Elephant Park did not allow them to leave any meat or beer behind. Rangers, whom I spoke to, denied this. Others remarked that it did not rain after the ritual because the sacrificial cow did not walk to the gravesite, but was driven there on the back of a four-wheel drive vehicle.



According to custom the cow must walk to the sacrificial site. The more it suffers the more the ancestors will accept the plea. However, because the site was in a nature reserve, with wild animals, it had to be transported.

The Khumalo's are only allowed to make rain for a small area around the Tembe Elephant Park. Of far greater social importance is the official rainmaking ritual of the Tembe people. This ritual draws together people from both sides of the border and thus contributes to union in the borderland. At this rainmaking ritual the ancient Tembe ancestors are venerated. These are the common ancestors for people north and south of the border. This ritual does not only reaffirm the bonds that tie the community of the dead to the community of the living, but also the historic, religious and social bonds that unite people north and south of the border.

The greater rainmaking ritual has to be conducted at the royal gravesites at Catembe on the Maputo Bay in Mozambique. The only time between 1975 and 1994 that this was done was in 1991. It might have been done by people resident in Catembe at another time, but the only time the royal family sanctioned the ritual during this time was in 1991 when there was a great drought in the area. According to a diviner who was at that ritual, two cows were slaughtered at the gravesite of the old Tembe kings at Catembe. Since the Mozambican war was still in progress, the Tembe king of that time, Mzimba Tembe, could not attend the ritual. As in the case of the Tembe Elephant Park, circumstances beyond peoples' control prevented them from performing the rain-making ritual correctly. In the former case people were not allowed to leave meat at the graves of their ancestors. In the latter, the war prevented key people from officiating at the ritual.

All these examples illustrate the ideal of intimate union between people, ancestors and land. The war in Mozambique and the displacement it caused, as well as the impermeable nature of the international border in the 1970s and 1980s, fractured this union and entrenched this separation. It is precisely at this time that possession through alien spirits created new ties of unity across the international border. According to most people I interviewed regarding this matter, possession by alien spirits in the borderland increased dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s as refugees who had lost all ties with their country explored new ways of crossing boundaries between South Africa and Mozambique.

#### **Displaced ancestors from across the border**

Healers and diviners in northern KwaZulu-Natal claim a connection to the supernatural powers across the Mozambican border through possession by Ndaus spirits. According to one diviner 'the ancestors are not too much powerful, Ndaus have too much power'. Possession by spirits tie healers in northern KwaZulu-Natal to the supernatural powers of a more 'traditional' Mozambique and, at the same time, reinforces old kinship ties that bind people north and south of the border in unison.

According to Lee (1969:130), the first reports of possession by alien spirits appeared amongst the Zulu in 1910. Ascription and spelling vary from district to district. Junod (1927) describes '*ndjao*' spirits amongst the Tsonga-speaking inhabitants of south-east Africa. Harries (1994:163) refers to these same spirits of the Ndaus-speaking people as '*ndiki*' spirits.<sup>2</sup> In the borderland people referred to these foreign spirits only as *ndaus* or *amandaus* spirits. Lee (1969) states that despite the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ndaus* and *ndiki* possession are particularly identical, though each cult possesses its own language. *Ndaus* have powers of possession, whereas the *ndiki* have none. *Ndiki* means spirit (Lee 1969:130).

confusion that exists between these foreign possessing spirits, because of the different spellings and appellations, one common factor is that ‘the naming and subjective aetiology of the states follow closely social change, particularly in culture contact situations’ (p.130).

Local people in the borderland have different interpretations of what exactly a Ndauspirit is. Everybody agreed that the Ndauspirits come from Mozambique and that they are very powerful. Apart from that, most people did not know much about them except that they can be extremely malevolent. John Mthembu, for instance, recalled that a Ndauspirit from Mozambique once made his daughter extremely ill. He called on the services of a diviner named Dlamini who is well known to have been possessed by a Ndauspirit himself. Dlamini instructed John to kill one of his goats to appease the Ndauspirit and to save his daughter. After John killed the goat his daughter was healed. About a month later she fell ill again. Dlamini once more instructed John to kill a goat, and again his daughter was healed. When his daughter fell ill for the third time, John consulted a different healer. He argued that Dlamini’s Ndauspirit made his daughter ill so that Dlamini and his Ndauspirit could eat goat’s meat each week.

After hearing John’s story, I went to visit Dlamini to find out more about the Ndauspirits. Dlamini told me that the Ndaus are a people living in Mozambique, on the Zimbabwe border. This explanation finds resonance in the ethnographic literature. Harries (1994:163) reports cases of Ndaupossession during the wars between the Gaza and the Ndauspeaking peoples of central Mozambique. The spirits of slain Ndausoldiers would invest the bodies of their Gaza killers to exact revenge on them. According to Honwana (2003:71), possession by Ndauspirits came through a phenomenon known in southern Mozambique as *mpfukwa*. *Mpfukwa* is a term that

comes from the verb *ku pfukwa*, which means ‘to wake up’, and indicates ‘a person who wakes up from the dead.’ According to Honwana (2003:71),

Mipfukwa, plural for ‘spirits’ and also known as ‘spirits of the war’ ... were those of foreign soldiers (Nguni and Ndau) killed during the Nguni wars in the southern region. The spirits of soldiers and civilians killed during the wars are believed to afflict the living (especially those who caused their death or mistreated them or their descendants in life)

Likewise, an informant of Nordstrom (1999:165) in Mozambique explained to her how the spirits of people one kills stays with you.

You see, if you kill someone, their soul stays with you. The souls of the murdered follow these soldiers back to their homes and their families, back to their communities to cause problems. The soldier’s life, his family, his community, begins to disintegrate from the strain of this.

According to oral traditions in the borderland, once the soldiers from the Mabudu chiefdom, who fought in the Gaza wars of the nineteenth-century, returned, they started to get ill. They would sweat, hallucinate and speak in strange languages. People soon realised that the soldiers spoke the language of the Ndau people they had fought against. The Ndau spirits were angry because they had not been buried properly and had not been incorporated into the community of the ancestors. To appease the Ndau spirits possessing them, people asked their own ancestors to accept these foreign spirits as part of the family. Should a Ndau accept this offer, he would stop harming the person he possessed and bless him or her with divining powers. From that point onwards the Ndau spirit was seen as part of the ancestor spirits of that person, although much more powerful, and would pass along the lineage line from a diviner to his children.

In the 1920s and 1930s Ndau spirit possession took on an epidemic form spreading rapidly south to Swaziland, northern KwaZulu-Natal and to the former Transvaal (Harries 1994:163). This coincided with the serious influenza and malaria

epidemics that hit those areas in 1919 and 1933 (Sundkler 1961:23). According to Harries (1994:63),

The belief in *ndiki* (*ndau*) was also carried to the mines where the frequency of death and the ritual impurity of burial produced a plethora of uneasy and displaced spirits awaiting incorporation into the world of the ancestors. Miners often served as unsuspecting vectors for these rootless shades by spreading them in the compounds and carrying them back to their rural homes.

Informants in northern KwaZulu-Natal said that if a person was part of the same work team as Mozambicans on the mines he too could be possessed by *Ndau*-spirits. One informant related,

If a friend of yours, who comes from Mozambique and who has that *Ndau*-spirit dies in the mines, that *Ndau* will not stay in the mines. It will come back with you and make you a powerful doctor.

*Ndau* have the unique ability to confer healers with the powers of becoming *nyamusoro* (a person who can smell out witches). Pienaar (1999:71) states that when a *Ndau* spirit possesses a person, special medicines are given to him or her. Furthermore, the initiation ritual of the *nyamusoro* differs from that of normal healers, and makes them much stronger. Sundkler (1961:23) observes that anyone who is possessed by a *Ndau* spirit can only be healed by someone else who possesses the spirit.

This is done by rites and dances designed to cause one of the patient's ancestral spirits to materialise. The initiate goes through many days of exhausting dance, until at last the spirit enters her. It speaks through the initiate in a reputedly foreign tongue, as, for instance, a so-called "Indian" or "Thonga" language. In actual fact it may be only a series of meaningless sounds, which are thought by the audience to be some foreign language. Sometimes two or even as many as seven different ancestral spirits may take up their abode in the person concerned and speak different languages (Sundkler 1961:23).

Dlamini, the diviner whom I interviewed, said that he inherited a *Ndau* spirit from his father. Dlamini calls it, 'a great blessing. Like the Holy Ghost'. Dlamini

argues that the fact that he has a Ndaus spirit indicates a common lineage between him and the Ndaus people of Mozambique. Chang (2001:53) found a similar situation in KwaNgwanase (Manguzi), where ‘some diviners claim that Ndawo [ndaus] spirits are lineage ancestors.’ A prominent and respected healer with whom I spoke in KwaNgwanase explained that many healers claim they have Ndaus-spirits to attract customers. According to this healer, ‘People think that Ndaus spirits are much stronger than our ancestors.’ Ndaus-spirits accord healers with a sense of mystery. For this reason, it is important for healers in northern KwaZulu-Natal to have a spiritual connection with Mozambique. This often includes being trained in Mozambique and using Mozambican medicines.

The question that needs to be answered is why people in northern KwaZulu-Natal view Mozambican healers and medicines as superior to their South African counterparts. There can probably be two answers. In the first place, people in northern KwaZulu-Natal see healers north of the border as stronger precisely because they are foreign. As Van Onselen (1996:72) remarks, ‘the opaque crafts of an outsider with the gift of healing often take precedence over the more familiar skills of an insider.’<sup>3</sup> These healers provide new medicines that transcend available techniques. Considering the situation in the borderland, one can say that the Mozambique/ South Africa border has become a ‘gateway to the supernatural’. That which lies beyond the spatial divide is foreign and unknown and therefore perceived to be better.

However, if it were merely the distance from patients that infused healers and their medicine with so much power, then Mozambicans would surely see South

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<sup>3</sup> Van Onselen (1996) describes how Kas Maine travels from Schweizer-Reneke in the former Transvaal to a San healer in present-day Botswana to receive treatment for his infertility. It is a long journey that takes a few days, yet Kas is willing to travel since he believes that the *foreign* medicine and healing must be better than that which he can get locally.

African diviners as superior. I could not find this to be so. Informants did not seek cures from South African diviners and viewed their own *nyamusoras* as far superior. Rodgers (2002:265) found a similar occurrence on the north-eastern Mozambique/South African borderland. According to Rodgers (2002) Massingir (area on the Mozambican side of the border) ‘was known across the border landscape as a place where one found powerful healers and rare herbs. It is a place where the important ancestors were buried and residents still claimed entitlement to land on the basis of clan identity and kinship’ (p.265).

When Mozambicans do seek treatment across the border they visit hospitals and clinics, not traditional healers. Mozambicans make up five percent of all in-patients at Manguzi hospital and as much as ten percent of patients seen at the borderland clinics of South Africa (see chapter six).

Thus, the international border should not only be seen as a gateway to the supernatural. It is rather, as I suggested in the previous chapter, a divide between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’. The reason why people from northern KwaZulu-Natal view healers and medicine from Mozambique as superior to those ones in South Africa is simply because it is natural and traditional. Things on the Mozambican side of the borderland are ‘truly’ African, untouched, or rather, influenced lesser, by ‘modernisation’. In the same way that people cross the international border to Mozambique to get palm wine or to eat bush meat, traditional food and drink of the area, they cross the border to get traditional medicine and traditional healing.

Healers in northern KwaZulu-Natal claim to be possessed by Ndau-spirits to gain access to the powers of ‘tradition’ that they associate with Mozambique. From a

functionalist perspective<sup>4</sup> Ndaou possession can thus be seen as strengthening the union between healers south and north of the border. Ndaou possession is not merely a physiological or metaphysical phenomenon. It also performs an important social role in uniting a fragmented society. As Boddy (1994:427) notes '[spirit] possession has been shown to be about morality, kinship, ethnicity, history, and social memory - the touchstones of social existence.' It is, according to Stoller (1995:36), 'an incontestably embodied phenomenon that triggers a myriad of cultural memories', which should not be seen in isolation of the social and cultural history of the people amongst whom it occurs. In the borderland Ndaou possession asserts shared ties of kinship and ethnicity that unite healers in modernised South Africa with 'traditional' Mozambique.

## **Conclusion**

The separation of people from their land reverberates in the relationship between people and their ancestors. The physical displacement of Mozambicans during the war also caused a spiritual displacement, in some cases between people and their ancestors, and in other cases of the ancestors themselves, being relocated to foreign lands. This physical and spiritual displacement was exemplified by the existence of an alienated international borderland milieu (Martinez 1994) throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

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<sup>4</sup>According to Stoller (1995:17) writers have applied five dominant forms of explanation to analyse spirit possession: functionalist, psychoanalytic, physiological, symbolic and theatrical. The strength of the functionalist analysis is that it highlights spirit possession as a social process with social consequences.



At the same time that physical and spiritual displacement causes separation and disharmony in the borderland, possession by displaced spirits asserts greater unity, even if healers only claim such unity to attract customers to their business.

As was stated in the previous chapters, a large percentage of people currently living in northern KwaZulu-Natal moved there during the Mozambican war. Many of these people nowadays consider themselves permanent residents, unwilling to return to Mozambique. Spirit possession, like ties of kinship, links people to those who reside on the opposite side of the border. These ties strengthen the borderland community and lead to a greater amount of similarity across the fence.