Songs by Female Diviner Initiates from Zwelibomvu in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: A Response to Patriarchal Abuse in their Society

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Abstract
Indigenous societies that are steeped in patriarchy have various avenues through which they deal with the abuse characteristic of relations in some of these communities. One such route is songs which allow them to voice that which, bound by societal expectations, they would not normally be able to say. This article presents the cases of several young female diviner initiates in Zwelibomvu, KwaZulu-Natal who have experienced different forms of abuse. These initiates, under the guise of being possessed and through songs that are supported by personal experience narratives, open up about the ordeals they suffer under patriarchal power in their families.

Introduction and Background

All forms of abuse have adverse effects on the victims, even to a point where they may lead to death. In traditional societies, highly culture-specific techniques of coping, such as speaking out via folk songs, can assist victims in dealing with the trauma of abuse and sometimes even enable them to escape the abusive situation. In indigenous rural areas of South Africa, where communities are still steeped in tradition, when women manifest unusual symptoms such as severe depression, help is sought from traditional healers called *izinyanga*. If after diagnosis these healers perceive the patients' symptoms to be related to an ancestral calling, they refer them to a diviner, or *isangoma* (plural, *izangoma*). The diviner takes them through a process of initiation known as *ukuthwasa*, which includes training and accompanying the initiates on their journey to become diviners.[1] The training period can be anything between six months to roughly a year and a half, depending on the circumstances of each initiate. During the course of training initiates leave their homes and live with a fully-fledged diviner who trains them in his or her homestead. At the end of the process, the initiates participate in a public ceremony, the *ukuphothula*, to mark the completion of their journey. Part of this ceremony involves a period of seclusion called *umgonqo*. This article examines songs and narratives about abuse experiences recorded from young female initiates in the rural community of Zwelibomvu in KwaZulu-Natal during both their umgonqo and later at the public phase of the ukuphothula. Diviner-training for women who have been abused leads to an escape from the abusive situation. The songs and narratives under examination here operate as a kind of culture-specific 'talk therapy' to deal with the trauma, but the women's new role as diviners also removes them permanently from their abusers and traumatic living conditions.

The women's songs, which are rooted in the indigenous knowledge systems of their culture, serve as a form of poetic license to utter that which their society would normally prevent them from saying. The young female initiates who agreed to be participants in this study revealed patriarchal abuse experiences through song—a folk medium highly characteristic of Zwelibomvu—thus claiming back their agency.This study uses feminist

standpoint theory to analyse how these women find a way to cope with their situations (Harding 1997). In an earlier project, I applied standpoint theory to better understand the narratives of young women talking about their imprisonment experiences (Mkhize and Zondi 2015). The female initiates' songs, together with personal-experience narratives spoken during the umgonqo period, provide an empowerment platform enabling them to expose their history of abuse (Thompson and Perks 1988). Thus, by expressing their experiences through songs, the women take a 'standpoint position' in which they refuse to be silent. Their songs become 'self-representations' (Mkhize and Zondi 201, 56) and give them licence to speak about their past. Both the narratives and the songs expose physical, emotional, and psychological forms of abuse that characterized their lives in their male-dominated homes.

Research has established that there is higher rate of patriarchal abuse among women who live in deep poverty, especially in rural areas ((Peek-Asa et al. 2011, 1743; Goodwin and Gotlib 2004, 135). Many societies perpetuate this kind of situation when patriarchal power structures go unchallenged (Smith 2005). Nevertheless, some women undergo more patriarchal abuse, or feel it more acutely, than do others. The experiences revealed through the songs of the female initiates in Zwelibomvu suggest that these individuals had been deeply wounded by some of their culture's expectations, such as those governing marriage: a woman has to serve men and give birth to children; if she does not, she is subjected to abuse.

The present article arises from a doctoral thesis project that sought to discover the reasons behind certain songs sung by women from Zwelibomvu. The resulting thesis was entitled '*Bahlabelelelani*: Why Do They Sing?'[2] That study found a prevalence of issues relating to gender and power in contemporary women's songs (Zondi 2008). I chose Zwelibomvu because the community resembles in many ways my rural village of birth, KwaNdebeqheke, which is about two hundred kilometres away from the research area. There, due to the influence of Christianity, one cannot readily observe intact diviner-initiation practices that still exist in Zwelibomvu. Zwelibomvu, furthermore, confirms the widespread perception that traditional African communities are permeated with song (Msimang 1986, 97). My earlier study had found that it is almost impossible to imagine an occasion or activity in Zwelibomvu where song is absent.

Zwelibomvu is geographically located some forty-five kilometres south of Durban in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It is constituted by seven districts. Five of these are named after the rivers from which inhabitants drink, and two derive from clan names. The former group comprises ePhangweni, eMkhangoma, ePanekeni, eZimbokodweni, and eMadwaleni while the latter is made up of Magcaba and Masomini areas. The distinction in the naming of the seven districts is evident in the beginning of the names. The first five make use of the initial locative prefix *e-* , typical of place names, whereas the other two are named for the predominant surnames of the clans found in the area, namely the Magcaba and Msomi clans.[3] As it would not have been feasible to deal with all areas, the clan-based areas were excluded from the study because they spilled over into another chiefdom, Mangangeni. This would have meant that ethical clearance would be required from the traditional leader of Mangangeni as well—a rather cumbersome and

tedious process. Another rationale in favour of their exclusion was that since the areas were clan-based the population in those two locations was relatively lower than that of the other five districts whose higher populations facilitated the sampling process. The data which inform this particular article come only from the district of eMkhangoma.

Zwelibomvu maintains traditional Zulu customs almost uncontaminated by Western influence. With patriarchy at the centre, male dominance over women and children in the family is prevalent in this community. Women are culturally perceived to be different from and inferior to men even though there is nothing that supports such social constructs. In some instances, men treat women as if they were their property. By extension, through bride price (*ilobolo*)—a practice linked to gender inequality and common in most African cultures, albeit known by different names—some heads of families feel it is within their power to 'sell' their daughters to the highest bidder. Other practices that are still highly valued in this community are polygamy[4] and virginity-testing, which are discussed further below.

The operational definition of 'women' for the purpose of the overall five-year study was females between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five. The present article, however, confines itself to songs sung by fifteen young women of eMkhangoma district between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six, including both unmarried (*izintombi*) and married women (*omakoti*). They were initiates who revealed that there was more to their 'illnesses' than met the eye. Their patriarchal upbringing, which prevented them as women from being vocal about what goes on in their lives, necessitated devising other means of drawing attention to their plight. Consequently, some faked illness while others resorted to extreme measures to seek attention. Once they had become diviner initiates, they were then able to use songs as a form of poetic license to expose what goes on behind closed doors. These songs were adapted from folk tunes and rhythms known in Zwelibomvu, set to new words composed by the women. More light is shed when the song lyrics are read together with the personal-experience narratives informing their composition. These songs, sung both during the seclusion phase (umgonqo) and at the public ukuphothula ceremony marking the end of the initiation period, are the focus of this article.

Methodology

My original field study of women's songs made use of qualitative, rather than quantitative, research methods to study the Zwelibomvu community and its systems because 'the processes and the social and cultural contexts which underlie various behavioural patterns . . . [are] mostly concerned with exploring the "why" question of research' (Holloway and Wheeler 2002, 51). Ethical clearance approval was given by the University of Natal Research Ethics Committee in 2004. For this five-year study most of the fieldwork took place between 2005 and 2006, excluding the summer months whenever possible because the ceremonies involved the slaughter of cows and goats, and families did not have refrigerators to store meat. My research assistant and I would attend ceremonies once a month, alternating districts and types of ceremonies. By the time I had completed my fieldwork, each of the districts had participated in at least two of each of the ceremonies characteristic of Zwelibomvu, although for the purposes of the report on that study each

district only represented one particular ceremony. The number of days spent with the family hosting a ceremony depended on the nature of the ceremony. For some (such as the one on which the present article is based) I spent a total of seven consecutive days. In this particular case, I stayed without my research assistant because it was a special privilege for me to attend the private umgonqo rituals associated with the ukuphothula ceremony. However, my research assistant was present at the actual ukuphothula ceremony itself where the community participated. Generally, we would arrive on a Thursday preceding the event, which normally took place on Saturday, and we left on the Sunday. See below in the section entitled, *Sites of Songs and Storytelling*.

Growing up in KwaNdebeqheke, a village that resembles my research site in many ways, I had not been able to interact closely with diviners because Christian families discouraged contact with them. When this opportunity presented itself in Zwelibomvu, it was therefore of particular personal as well as professional interest. In Zwelibomvu I was also very fortunate to be privy to those rituals that were normally not accessible to the public due to the fact that I shared the same surname as the wife of the traditional leader, which meant that I received preferential treatment as a researcher. Being a respected woman, the wife of the traditional leader had put in a good word for me with the diviner responsible for the initiates. I was granted access to the most 'sacred' space where nobody except the diviner and her newly qualified interns were allowed. After arrangements had been put in place, everyone involved welcomed me in their midst without any suspicion. There were several factors associated with an easy flow of communication. First, there were no cultural barriers as we belonged to the the same ethnic and linguistic group. Second, residents had seen me in the village for over a year while I studied the various contexts in which songs were performed in their community. I had not been a disgrace to them in all the time I had been among them; for example, I had not crossed the line by wearing trousers, which their dress code prohibits women from wearing. Third, my gender undoubtedly had an impact on the way female initiates accepted me. They trusted me and understood that I was not there to judge. This privileged treatment was invaluable because it brought me closer to the initiates, who also felt at ease with me. Lastly, the fact that I was going to share my findings beyond my own country, so that people from other nations would get to know about them, added to the women's excitement and willingness to share their experiences.

The first step involved my physical attendance at both the private and public ritual ceremonies where songs were performed. The songs I heard there turned out to be the tip of an iceberg, as they were clearly informed by a massive amount of raw data. This led to the second part of the fieldwork, namely the recording of personal-experience narratives shared by the singers. The life stories these women volunteered, studied along with the nuances observed during their singing performances, elucidated the nature of their songs. The two components (song performance and narratives) together provide insight into why the female initiates sing, and highlight the impact of gender relations in this community. Through interacting with and observing women in their natural environment, a completely new world opened up.

Qualitative studies provide 'the life worlds of the actors being studied and produce insider perspectives of the actors and their practices' (Mouton 2001, 148). This study revealed an in-depth picture of song embedded in the community. The focus had to be on the meanings and interpretations the initiates attached to their songs, as opposed to any general societal notions about songs. The data presented in this article come from five of the participants, as their responses represent the major themes that emerged from all fifteen. These five are abused young women who, having completed their training, were expected (after the ukuphothula ceremony) to function as fully qualified izangoma, albeit under the supervison of their trainer for at least a couple of months. In fact, all fifteen initiates in the study successfully completed their training, but what is not known (at least to me) is how many of them actually did practise as diviners afterwards.

For anonymity, no names have been used in this article. Rather, pseudonyms and codes that were allocated to the participants during the study are used.

Sites of Songs and Storytelling

In order to appreciate the folkloric nature of the songs presented below, one needs an understanding of the role of song in this community. Songs circulate through almost every aspect of life. One would never be able to cover them all, but a few examples of channels of circulation can be mentioned.[5] First, there are songs for *ilima*, a collective name for a group of women who live in the same neighbourhood and who come together to help one another with any kind of women's activities. Some of the activities they do as ilima are the tilling of land, collection of firewood, and fetching of water from rivers or wells for large ceremonies, plus caring for children (Mathonsi and Gumede 2006, 483). Another channel is *umemulo* 'a ceremony for a girl reaching the marriageable age' Magwaza (1993, 7). A third channel of circulation is *umgcagco*, a traditional Zulu wedding which involves two parties: the bridal party, *umthimba*, and the groom's party, *ikhetho*. This ceremony is a culmination of many ceremonies that would have taken place in between, including *ilobolo* (the process of obtaining a wife through the exchange of property; i.e. bride price). A fourth channel is *amacece* where different districts come together to outshine one another as they compete for first place in their dances. This happens during Christmas or New Year festivals also known as *ihlahla*. The winning district receives a cow which they slaughter and share amongst the residents of that district. A final channel pertains to the songs that mark the end of initiation rites during the ceremony of ukuphothula, and it is this which this article addresses.

In all instances, songs are traditional in content and are transmitted from generation to generation. The lyrics or dance moves might change slightly depending on the nature of the event and on the ages of the people who engage in them. For example, the same song sung by women during ilima activities might be heard at the umemulo ceremony with dance moves that are not quite the same. This is because the former comprises mainly older women who, in their dance moves, may not raise their legs as high as younger girls do during umemulo. New songs become naturalized as members of the community adopt them, and eventually people may forget their origins. For example, I heard songs in one district in Zwelibomvu whose origin only few older community

members knew about (Zondi 2012, 194). Sometimes, one may only learn about their origin long after they are performed. Some of the songs by earlier women initiates are now included among songs that are sung during umemulo and umgcagco ceremonies without everybody knowing how they originated. They sing them simply because they are local songs.

A comparative example may help elucidate this point. In a recent article in *Folklore* Devender Kumar presents an interesting study of womens's private folk songs that continue to thrive despite provocative language that is inherent in them**.** These songs question the prejudiced patriachal authority in communities in Haryana, northern India. Kumar argues that because of content that portrayed the men of this society negatively, the songs almost went extinct even though they were rooted in the real experiences of the people (Kumar 2017, 57). However, as Foucault maintains, '[w]here there is power, there is resistance' (cited in Kumar 2017, 57). These songs, including a ballad called 'Jatāna' about an assertive princess, have endured in the form of midnight gatherings in the isolated domain of the women's subculture.The songs' resilience for older women has ensured that their timelessness remains inscribed in the memories of generations to come. Even though the young girls are no longer interested in singing them, they at least know of 'Jatana'.

In the same way, within Zulu culture it is taboo to confront male authority directly. However, it is sanctioned when conveyed through song. The women initiates in my study resorted to song to express that which, prevented by their patriarchal societal norms, they could not say without adverse repercussions. In both the Zulu and Haryana contexts, the songs are a critique of the partriarchal hegemony. In the same way as the ballad 'Jatāna' may be viewed as a folk form that exposes patriarchal norms oppressive to Haryana women, songs sung by female initiates, drawing from an already existing fountain of cultural songs that critique Zwelibomvu's patriarchal hegemony, are folk expressions. Their tenacity is enhanced by the fact that, unlike 'Jatāna', they are performed in full view of the public.

The women whose songs are presented here gathered at the homestead of Nake-ZW67,[6] one of the female diviners in Zwelibomvu, which became their home for a period of six months while they were undergoing initiation training and rites to become izangoma. For the duration of a week prior to end of their journey (at the ukuphothula ceremony), the women were in seclusion (umgonqo). In the evenings, they had rituals that culminated in songs which they would later sing to the public on the day of their ukuphothula. Each of the initiates had her own song in which she was a lead singer while the others supported her by joining in the chorus. The lyrics were rather sad and emotional. However, the tune and rhythm were familiar, demonstrating that they were rooted in the culture that was known by everyone. This is also why I was able to learn them quickly, because the women mainly replaced lyrics of already known folk songs with their own. This is what prompted me to ask if they wanted to share the meaning behind their songs.[7] While both songs and personal-experience narratives were presented in full view of other initiates, only the songs were performed for the public audience on the day of the ceremony. When the initiates sang in private (in preparation for the public ceremony)

one initiate would start the song and the rest would join in the chorus. Sporadically there would be screams as the young women recalled a painful event that gave rise to the composition of the song. The cries would be infectious, as the whole group joined in, with fellow initiates recalling their own afflictions. It was right after these private sessions that they told their narratives. For me as researcher, the narratives served as a window to look inside the lives of the composers of songs. Focusing on the story content, these oral narratives turned out to be vital in this study not just because they explained the roots of the song, but also because personal narratives are one of the natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to organize and express meaning and knowledge (Kvale 2009, 153).

The Songs and Narratives

Songs are carriers of power, especially in cases of distress and emotional suffering (Vail and White 1991, 244). This is confirmed in the songs sung by the women interviewed for this study who had been through various forms of patriarchal abuse. In patriarchal African communities, such as those of Zwelibomvu, under normal circumstances women are not allowed to reveal their oppressive family issues, as they are considered private (Zondi 2007, 20). During seclusion, umgonqo, where I was present, the women seemed to feel empowered to reveal and address these intimate family concerns through their songs. Even if it does not seem like much of an achievement, the songs brought some solace to the women. In this way, songs serve as a therapy for the abused who use them to express their experiences at the hands of men to whom they are supposed to matter: husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, or lovers. Vail and White (1991, 198) argue that one of several functions that song fulfils is that of social protest against authority.

Amongst several descriptions of personal narrative, Roberto Franzosi defines it as 'one method of recapitulating past experiences by matching a verbal sequence of clauses of events which it is inferred actually ooccurred' (Franzosi 1998, 519). Taking the discussion further Rik Hoogeveen and Marcel Veenswijk describe them as 'temporal stories in which meaning is created, modified and distributed during a process of social interaction' (Hoogeveen and Veenswijk 2016, 90). In simple terms and in line with this study, personal narratives may be viewed as life histories that emphasize the experience of the individual and show how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals (Marshall and Rosman 2011, 151). In all these definitions it is apparent that context shapes narratives**.** Thus, both the songs and the corresponding personal-experience narratives of the initiates are presented below, because the narratives reveal the context of the songs' composition: patriarchal abuse within the women's homes.

For ease of navigation, each song is presented and immediately followed by its corresponding narrative, which provides context. At the end of the five sets, there is an analysis of some trends that emerge from the data. The songs are given in isiZulu with close English translations. However, the narratives are presented only in translation, while keeping as close as possible to the original text, because it would have been cumbersome to include both the source and target languages.

Song 1 (Bukwayo ZW-02 2008)[8]

Ngizoyizekela bani le nkiyankiya? *With whom am I going to share this mess?*

Leader: Ngizoyizekela bani le nkiyankiya? With whom am I going to share this mess?

Chorus: Yinkiyankiya. It is a mess indeed.

Leader: Uban'ozongikholwa nozongilalela? Who is going to believe me and listen to me?

Chorus: Yinkiyankiya! It is a mess indeed!

Leader: Kumama, ubaba, ngisho nakugogo To mother, father and even grandmother

Chorus: Ngiwuhubhu lukabhejana! I am such a great liar!

Leader: Ngoba ngiwuhubhu! Because I am such a liar

Chorus: Ngiwuhubhu lukabhejane! I am such a great liar!

Story 1

I was thirteen years old when my parents sent me to live with my grandmother in a different village. This followed the death of my aunt who had lived with her together with her husband. Because they had no children of their own, I was sent to my grandmother's village so she could have someone to send on errands. My aunt's husband continued to live with us. One night while I was asleep I felt that there was someone creeping on my floor mat. He touched me. I wanted to scream but he put his hand over my mouth and told me he was my uncle and that he was not going to hurt me. He told me he wanted to look after me. He said I should never allow any young boys near me because they would hurt me. He made me believe that all young girls my age were already making love with young boys who did not have any skill at it. He ran his hands all over me and slept with me. I did not resist. He told me that this should be our secret because if I told anyone nobody would believe my story. This happened for a very long time until when I was fifteen years old I became pregnant. Everyone wanted to know who was responsible for my pregnancy. I was afraid to tell the truth. After being beaten up several times by both my mother and uncle I exposed him, but no one believed me. My uncle denied having ever touched me. My mother and father took sides with him and called me a liar. They said my aunt's husband would never do something like that to me. I was on my own. Before long, I lost the baby. I began to feel sad and lonely. I would cry myself to sleep. I wanted someone to tell me I was not a bad child. I began to hallucinate and my family referred me to a traditional healer who further sent me to a diviner. The diviner claimed that the ancestors wanted me to be a diviner and kept me for training. At the diviner's homestead, I met several other young women who had predicaments of their own. We would sing and dance until we felt like we were in a trance. Then we would share our stories with one another and in the process find comfort.

Song 2 (Ngoneni-ZW05 2008)

Ukube ngangazi *If only I knew*

Leader: Ukube ngangazi If only I knew

Chorus: Wawuyokwenzani?	What would you have done?
Leader: Ngabe angimqomanga	I would not have fallen in love with him
Chorus: Wawuyokwenzani?	What would you have done?
Leader: Ngabe ngabaleka engafuni jazi	I should have left him when he refused the condom
Chorus: Manje wawungazi	You did not know
Leader: Ukuthi ngiqoma ithuna	That I am getting married to the grave
Chorus: Manje wawungazi	You did not know.

Story 2

I was brought up to value my virginity. In my district, it was an expectation that all young girls attend virginity-testing quarterly. My parents were proud of me. My father would tell me that any man who wanted to marry me would pay all eleven cows [an average ilobolo for many ordinary families in KwaZulu-Natal who participate in Zulu culture]. I also believed that whoever married me would love and respect me for all the days of our lives. I was married at the age of twenty-two. On our wedding night, I told my husband I was still a virgin. He told me he knew that and that was why he paid so many cows. The way he spoke to me was not convincing that he thought I was special. I asked him to use protection but he said he paid full ilobolo and was 'not going to eat a sweet still in a wrapper'[9]. He was so casual about it. Within three months, I conceived. There was so much joy in the two families. I started my prenatal clinic visits. One of the procedures was to test for HIV. The results came back positive. I do not remember what happened after the communication of my results. The next thing I knew I was in hospital. I was told that I had passed out and was transferred to a nearby hospital. When I came to, the doctors and nurses, who tried to comfort me and to assure me that they would save my baby, surrounded me. I never became right again. My mental state was never the same. That is why after the traditional healer examined me, I was referred to the diviner to undergo initiation rites.

Song 3 (Thumani-ZW08 2008)

Ngilahliwe ubaba nomama	*Mother and father have disowned me*
Leader: Ngilahliwe ubaba nomama	Mother and father have disowned me
Chorus: Abakusukelanga	There must be a reason
Leader: Bathi eyabo ingane	They say their child
Chorus: Abakusukelanga	There must be a reason
Leader: Ayimithi kungaziwa	Cannot be pregnant without their knowledge
Chorus: Wena wawenzani?	What did you think you were doing?
Leader: Sengingumhambuma	I am now homeless
Chorus: Wena wawenzani?	What did you think you were doing?

Story 3

At seventeen, I fell in love with a man who had come to our village from elsewhere. Because I did not know how my family was going to take to the news, I decided to keep it to myself for some time. Therefore, I did not notify the senior girl*, iqhikiza,* who would

then have found ways of informing my parents. While still contemplating whether to share the news I discovered that I was pregnant. When my parents found out, they did not ask me any questions; they simply chased me away. I fled to the man who was responsible for my pregnancy, but he denied paternity. I went from homestead to homestead seeking shelter. Those who opened their doors to me made me work like a slave to pay for my food. I tilled their land without rest. I had a miscarriage and lost my baby. Neighbours called me a killer because it was rumoured that I had performed an abortion. My world fell apart. I started to go crazy. That was when the last family I stayed with referred me to a diviner.

Song 4 (Thithi-ZW011 2008)

Ukhon'owami ungilindile	*Mine is out there waiting*
Leader: Ukhon'owami ungilindile	Mine is out there waiting
Chorus: Inking'ikuphi?	What is your problem?
Leader: Engamiselwa yena ngisesekujuleni	Who was long appointed for me
Chorus: Inking'ikuphi?	What is your problem?
Leader: Kwemicabango kaMvelingqangi	While I was still in God's thoughts
Chorus: Inking'ikuphi?	What is your problem?
Leader: Kodwa baba uthi nang'owami	But you, father, say here is the one.
Chorus: Oh he!	Oh, shame!
Leader: Nawe mama uyangikhaphela	And you too, mama, betray me
Chorus: Oh he!	Oh, shame!
Leader: Kanti sengaba sendalini yini?	Am I a commodity for sale?
Chorus: Oh he	Oh, shame!

Story 4

I fell in love with a wonderful man when I was in my late teens, nineteen to be exact. I knew that this was my prince charming. I always looked forward to the time when I would go fetch water or firewood, as these errands served a good purpose as our rendezvous. In our district when a young girl falls in love, she has to inform the senior girl (iqhikiza) before her parents find out. Then there are processes to be followed before the parents get involved. In the week that I had planned to break the news to the senior girl, my parents called me to a meeting. There I was told that they were marrying me off to one of the most influential and wealthy men in the district. According to them, I was going to have the best in life. My husband-to-be was twice my age. I resisted, but my father threatened to chase me away from his home if I did not heed his word. With nowhere to go, I consented. I was heartbroken and confused. Everything happened so fast. Bride-price (ilobolo) was paid for me in the form of cows and I was married off to the man I did not love. I was miserable and stayed without food for days. I began losing weight. I was referred to the diviner and that is how I ended here. I am hoping to get back with the love of my life.

Song 5 (Hloni-ZW014 2008)

Bathi ngiyinyumba mina	*They say I am barren*
Leader: Bathi ngiyinyumba mina	They say I am barren

Chorus: Hawu wemah!	Oh my gosh!
Leader: Bangibiza ngonyumba katali	They call me a sterile barren one
Chorus: Hawu wemah!	Oh my gosh!
Leader: Bambuz'uyifunani inyumba	They ask him what he wanted from a sterile one.
Chorus: Hawu wemah!	Oh my gosh!
Leader: Kepha nami angikaze ngimbone	But I have never seen
Chorus: Hawu wemah!	Oh my gosh!
Leader: Owakhe ongenyumba	His offspring, since he is fertile
Chorus: Hawu wemah kwaze kwanzima!	Oh my gosh, how horrible.
Leader: Makavele phela ngimbone	Let me see his offspring.
Chorus: Hawu wemah kwaze kwanzima	Oh my gosh, how horrible.

Story 5

I come from a polygamous family. My mother was the second of three wives. She was brought into my father's family when her eldest sister could not conceive for her husband. As an adult, I learned that my father did not have to pay bride-price for my mother because he had already paid it for her sterile sister. When I was born, things did not go well for my mother either. I was not the son everyone in the family had hoped she would give birth to. Three years later things changed for the better for my mother, when my brother was born. However, they became worse for me, a child. Growing up I knew that I was not as treasured as my younger brother. Everyone in the homestead adored him and kept referring to him as an heir, *indlalifa*. My father would call him to introduce him to the guests whenever they visited. I was never called for introductions. I would ask my brother why my father sent for him. He would tell me that he wanted him to meet his guests. I wondered why my father never introduced me. This hurt me a lot. One day my brother went as far as telling me that to matter in our culture one has to be a male child. Those were my formative years of my life and my own brother and father were sowing seeds of gender inequality in my mind. I could not wait for the day when someone would ask for my hand in marriage. It happened sooner than I thought. However, I was unable to conceive. My in-laws called me derogatory names such as 'the sterile one, *inyumba'*. My husband married two wives afterwards. Neither of them bore him a child either. They continued labelling all of us 'barren', while our husband lived each day as if nothing was wrong. The two other women left after five years, but I remained because my parents told me to persevere and stay. The departure of my co-wives made life unbearable for me. I could not cope and I started to feel very depressed. I did crazy things that compelled my family to refer me to the diviners.

Recurring Themes in Zwelibomvu Initiates' Folk Songs

Karin Barber observes that African songs may depict social problems as experienced by their singers (Barber 1997, 113). The women cited above express their feelings about patriarchal control of their bodies and sexuality (Bukwayo-ZW02 and Thithi-ZW011 200), infidelity in relationships (Ngoneni-ZW05 2008), suffering they go through if they are not

able to meet socially constructed expectations such as producing offspring for their husbands (Hloni-ZW014), and male deceit (Thumani-ZW08 2008). While there are many themes that emerge from the songs and stories of the Zwelibomvu women initiates, some of the main ones are incest, rape, and sexual and verbal harassment—indicating that some of these women experience these in their lives. Cultural pressures that cause women to keep their rape experiences secret have far-reaching consequences for them. In the case of the first song, by BukwayoZW02, the issue addressed goes beyond rape to incest. African societies have been generally silent on issues of incest despite its adverse effects on the young. It has been argued there is no known society or culture devoid of the incest taboo—it is possibly the most universal of all things humanly prohibited (Arkin 1984, 375). The words that resonate in and capture the essence of the first song are *inkiyankiya* (mess, chaos, confusion) and *uhubhu lukabhejane* (a liar) respectively. The composer finds herself in a very awkward position: first by conceiving a child through incestuous rape and then by being called a liar. In Zulu culture a man who is married to your maternal aunt is like your blood relative; hence, in this case the sexual abuse can be referred to as incest. It is a common phenomenon to find rape victims being taken for liars even by people very close to them. The significance of the words resounds in the chorus with which the group decided to back the composer. It is no wonder that this individual would find herself in a state that called for intervention. Diviner intervention and the initiation journey seem to provide an escape for the young women. Whether this is temporary or permanent would require long-term tracking of the subjects of this study.

Virginity[10] is another focus of the songs. A well-bred Zulu girl knows that she has to preserve herself for her husband only. These norms are instilled in the minds of the young from a tender age all the way to adolescence when a senior girl known as the iqhikiza takes on the socialization role. Her role is to see that young unmarried girls conform to societal values. Within Zulu culture, virginity is further assured through rites such as virginity-testing. These rituals culminate in the Umhlanga Reed Dance where the Zulu King, in full view of the nation, proclaims the young women the 'flowers of the nation'. At these ceremonies, marriageable girls stand a chance of finding future husbands. While divergent views exist on this practice, with its supporters saying that it helps to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS, African Human Rights activists claim it violates a woman's privacy. However, the young people who believe in it defend this practice, and do not want to give it up. Hence, at the recent Umhlanga Reed Dance the girls were heard singing songs in which they categorically expressed their love of the virginity-testing custom. The song by Ngoneni-ZW05 is a lamentation for having been married to a non-deserving man. It highlights patriarchal abuse where, despite the woman having kept herself pure for her husband, she was still let down by the man who was supposed to treasure her, if for nothing else, at least for her virginity. This raises a question for her, 'Was it worth the wait?'

The other prominent theme that emerges from these songs is that of the traditional role of the father. Krige puts forward a notion that within the Zulu social belief system fatherhood is tantamount to sacredness. She states, 'in Zulu society the father, called *baba*, is respected and feared and his command obeyed' (Krige 1936, 24). While this idea still

holds for communities such as Zwelibomvu in the twenty-first century, it does not strictly apply to suburban and urban areas where modernity has brought some relaxation in the understanding of the father's authority. The story narrated by Thumani-ZW08, composer of the third song, is a testimony that as heads of their families, some men abuse authority. In the case of Thumani-ZW0, she was deprived of her home. The matter is made worse by her lover who, by denying paternity, fails her during hard times. The initiates' songs and stories bring to the fore the phenomenon of forced marriages, which are not unusual in this community. Nor are they restricted to Zulu culture: within Indian cultures, for example, the historical tradition of arranged marriages continues to be retained in the twenty-first centrury (Jaiswal 2014, 1). The fourth song, by ThithiZW011, is a lamentation for an arranged marriage. As far as Zulu arranged marriages are concerned, it is only a woman who is compromised. She has no input in the negotiations made about her life**.** Driven by greed, fathers may negotiate a bride price with the highest bidder for their daughter. Whether she is in a relationship is immaterial. Her feelings are not taken into consideration. She has to be submissive and do as she is told. Several African cultural commentators, amongst them Siphamandla Mathaba (2012) have criticized this practice, which is centred on greed and selfishness on the part of the decision makers in general (who are always men). In traditional communities such as Zwelibomvu the number of cattle a man has measures his wealth. Unsuspecting girls may become a quick road to riches for their fathers. If a man is poor, he may use the same cattle he received as bride price for his daughter to assist his son to get married. Because the woman who composed song four already had someone she loved, it became difficult for her to cope with pretending that all was well. Moreover, because the woman was not content with the man she had been obliged to marry; neither of them enjoyed the marriage.

The last concern these performances address is polygamy**.** There are different views for justifying polygamy. A cultural insider's position, for example, would be that it is a proper thing to marry a second or third wife if the senior wife is infertile or if she is not able to give birth to a son (Ozkan et al. 2006, 218). One cultural expert, who writes and gives talk shows on national radio stations and television, Ndela Ntshangase, emphasises family values inherent in Zulu culture which he alleges necessitates 'the presence of children growing up with both parents'. On those grounds, he continues, 'polygamy allows all children to be born into a family, to have access to both parents, unlike an illegitimate child'.[11] As an example of a cultural outsider's explanation of why polygamy exists in communities that practice it, in an article on polygyny, Connie Anderson, while disapproving of the practice, tries to explain why it continued to be practiced in South Africa during Apartheid. She argues that it was a response to poverty and oppression (Anderson 2000, 104). Based on the fact that Zulu society has always been polygamous, even before Apartheid views such as these provoke unpleasant responses in communities where polygamy is entrenched as people being studied feel their way of life is not fully understood. Some studies have shown the detrimental psychological effects of polygamous families on women and children living and being raised in such families (Al-Krenawi 2006, 173). The fifth story above shows psychological effects of being raised as a child of a polygamous marriage as well as being married into a polygamous family. In traditional

societies, one of the roles of a man is to procreate. The recurring theme in the fifth song, by HloniZW014, is that of the stigma the composer bore when her in-laws constantly reminded her about her supposed barenness. The effects remained with her long after. What the perpetrators failed to understand was that it was possible that problem was with the husband rather than the wives. The story of this composer further refutes a notion of co-wives as a source of agony for women in polygamous unions (Gage-Brandon 1992, 285). On the contrary, the composer found support from her co-wives, hence the escalation of her depression after the co-wives left the compound. In essence, I maintain that polygamous arrangements are usually bad for women and/or children even though polygamy's supporters argue that the effects for individual women or children can be quite varied, with some situations being quite positive.

Unpacking the Concept of Ubungoma *(Divination)*

In order to appreciate and adequately understand what has been discussed thus far, the concept of *ubungo*
ma (divination) deserves elaboration. The recent work of Winifred Ogana and Vivian Ojong is especially useful for understanding divination as it exists in KwaZulu-Natal. Its relevance stems from their interest in the gendered nature of ubungoma in the same way as my study's focus is on female izangoma (diviner) initiates. Their article was informed by the findings of a previous qualitative study where in a sample of ten izangoma, only one was male (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 53). The aim of their review article was "to provide alternative approaches to understanding issues that are largely independent of the prevailing dominant discourse in KwaZulu-Natal's mostly patriarchal society" (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 53). They maintain that at the beginning of the twenty-first century most izangoma are women. They further examine the relationship between the male-to-female disparity amongst izangoma and the context of a highly patriarchal Zulu society (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 57). Differentiating between *i*zinyanga (healers) and izangoma, they note that the former are mainly men while the latter are women.[12] What they do not mention though is that izinyanga and izangoma actually work as partners, hence the referral process. The discrepancy in gender of the two occupations may also be explained in terms of the Nguni[13] culture, of which Zulus are a subset, which emphasises gendered divison of labour. Izinyanga are predominantly males as their physical strength enables them to search for herbal medicines anywhere, including forested areas where wild animals may be found. Generally, women would not cope as well under those tougher conditions. However, the herbs that izangoma use for healing are mainly made available through the efforts of izinyanga. What is common between the two is that they both have diagnostic and healing powers. However, the main difference is that izinyanga cannot cure the ailments associated with ubungoma (divination). The range of work of the izangoma in their communities includes foretelling the future; pinpointing causes of bad luck, diseases, and death; instilling the power to attain health, wealth, and safety; and finding lost objects in a process known as *ukunuka*, 'smelling' or 'determining' the perpetrator in cases of witchcraft (Ogana and Ojong, 2015, 62).

While there are conflicting views on who may become an isangoma, there seems to be consensus that the calling to become one is vested in one's ancestors. Harriet Ngubane offers a comprehensive understanding of the ancestral role in the ubungoma calling (Ngubane 1977). This is in line with what some intiates reported—that when they exhibited certain disorders which resulted in them losing weight or 'going crazy', the izinyanga told them that the ancestors were calling them to become izangoma and hence referred them to established izangoma. While there is no debate about ancestral calling being available to either sex (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 67), Kuper argues that the preponderence of females over males in the vocation can be explained in terms of the patriarchal nature of Zulu society (Kuper 1947, 163). The personality traits required of izangoma, including high moral ideals, acceptance of abstinence from sexual activities when expected to, and willingness to be submissive, are by virtue of the patriarchal culture, more characteristic of women than of men. Moreover, it would appear that for various reasons, men do not wish to be tied down by the inhibitive taboos on sex, food, and general behaviour imposed while undergoing training (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 62). In KwaZulu-Natal in earlier days izangoma were found in rural areas, but now they are also found in urban and semi-urban areas. In fact, some prominent personalities such as television celebrities and academics are publicly acknowledging their ancestral calling and are not ashamed to practise as izangoma. This might be due to the Traditional Health Practitioners Bill, which was passed in 2004 in line with provisions of the World Health Organisation's Centre for Health Department (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 56). In view of that, African Traditional Medicine (ATM) was approved because it was found to rely 'excusively on practical experience and observation handed down from generation to generation' (Ogana and Ojong 2015, 56). Prior to that legislation, ATM might have been shunned, due to the influence of earlier European ethnographers, such as Agnes Winifred Hoernlé who described it as 'superstition, witchcraft, magic, immoral, or illegal' (Hoernlé 1937, cited in Ogana and Ojong 2015, 55).

Attributes of Traditional Songs

Having explored ubungoma, it is equally important to examine those attributes of folk songs that give them meaning and utility in the context of women's specific concerns. Intimately involved in the way of life of many African societies, including those of South Africa as represented by the community of Zwelibomvu, are various traditional types of songs and dance moves. Dances that accompany song, with their rhythmic gestures and representational actions, arrest the mind and fire deep emotions of affection, agony, encouragement, and other feelings. In traditional African cultures this is achieved through engaging one's entire body, creating gestures that stretch outward to the imagination and 'soul' of the audience, thus rendering dance as part of creative communication and a way to give voice to what the dancer feels inside. The audience, in turn, boosts the performance since both performer and audience share this mimetic experience. Entrenched in the indigenous knowledge systems of the people, these modes of singing and dancing are passed down from generation to generation, albeit with some adaptation. Ruth Finnegan, a scholar of note in the field of African oral studies who has inspired numerous scholars

throughout the world with her innovative research, illustrates how oral forms build on the past and in that way become a link between past and present (Finnegan 1970; Kaschula 2013, 141). She presents a variety of contexts in which songs are used as an avenue for commenting about societal issues. For instance, she remarks on the purpose of song where Maori and Chilean women are concerned, maintaining that they use songs as an expression of their pent-up emotions caused by their patriarchal conditions—a discussion that is clearly relevant to my work. Finnegan asserts that women's songs convey the revulsion they feel for the female subordination that prevails in the societies she writes about, especially in their marital lives. More specific to the South African situation, Russell Kaschula talks about songs sung during the journey towards becoming a diviner, which he perceives as a 'continuum . . . underpinned by the cultures and traditions that place us on an ever changing continuum rather than a linear trajectory of existence' (Kaschula 2013, 143). This observation further supports the folkloric nature of the songs sung by Zwelibomvu women initiates in that even though they address individual women's specific challenges, they nevertheless draw from the wisdom of past generations. Another scholar of African song, Johannes Fabian, examines the cultural dimension of songs as they apply to the Lubumbashu people of Zaire (the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo). He gives a description of integrated, publicly articulated ideas about power that emanate from public events where songs are central (Fabian 1990). Similarly, Zwelibomvu could be perceived in that light; even though these women may not seem to achieve much, performing in public prevents them from having tantrums caused by pent-up emotions. Equally, Karin Barber argues that Zulu songs bring hope to those in distress (Barber 1997). In a transitional stage of the history of South Africa women have been finding both a political and literary voice through the medium of song (Stewart 1994). Other studies undertaken in South Africa and beyond maintain that there is massive voice in oral literacy (Gunner 1979; James 1999; Meintjes 2003). As for the stories that form part of this discussion, they are also informed by the tradition of folktales; in the evening families would gather around the fire and listen to older members – especially women – pass down cultural mores to the young to fulfil both entertainment and didactic purposes. Thus the personal-experience narratives of the Zwelibomvu women initiates, told around the fire in the evenings at the diviner's homestead, recapitulate one of the the folktale traditions which is still alive in that community, thereby 'keeping tradition alive rather than frozen in time' (Cocq 2014).

Conclusion

In conservative communities such as that of Zwelibomvu there exist binaries whose rules apply differently to men and women; the double standards whose 'patriarchal representation of women in a hierarchical opposition to men' (Hélène Cixous, cited in Kumar 2017, 64) cause challenges that can be addressed only through certain channels. As part of the indigenous knowledge systems of the Zulu people, Zwelibomvu songs incorporate Zulu culture and traditions as they apply to and are practised by this community. Thus, the case of female diviner initiates speaks to the significant role of traditional performance in mediating concerns. This article goes beyond the theoretical

explanations of patriarchal power to concrete experiences of those harshly affected by it. Songs and personal-experience stories shared by Zwelibomvu women initiates about to complete their initiation journey at the ukuphothula ceremony make clear the unequal gender power relations condoned by patriarchal societies. Ukuthwasa, the initiation process to become a diviner, helps most women who survive patriarchal abuse to gain power and reflect on their personal experiences—the journey that led them to a diviner in the first place. It is through songs and stories of misfortune that they confront their situation. In this sense, their songs have become a channel through which to mediate their circumstances. As in the case of Haryana in India, Zwelibomvu women initiates' songs not only provide resourceful pleasure, but also 'induce feelings of solidarity to develop and nurture the skills of interrogation and to sharpen women's powers of negotiation' (Jassal Smita Tewari, cited in Kumar 2017, 69). In this context, songs and singing play a significant role as part of women's empowerment.

The phenomenon described here, where, burdened by cultural expectations, Zwelibomvu women find themselves in dire conditions, is not exceptional. Vail and White, for instance, recount a fascinating historical aspect of the role of songs among Tumbuka women at a time when the Ngoni, a foreign group that migrated into central Africa around 1856, suppressed many of their customs (Vail and White 1991, 231). Through *vimbuza*, a type of spirit possession that served as a social therapy for them, the Tumbuka women spoke out against the overthrow of their matrilineal kinship system, thus becoming a public voice of protest directed towards authority.

Songs by Zwelibomvu's young female initiates speak to issues women face in their daily lives. Those songs act as advocacy for the rural women who lack resources and platforms to voice their life challenges, including oppression and depression. Through their performances these women could be said to be re-constructing their gender identity, which Judith Butler terms 'a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo' (Butler 1988, 520). Singing songs such as these in front of an audience provides women with spaces to express how they really feel about the patriarchal abuse under which they live. Zwelibomvu women's songs, modelled upon the indigenous knowledge systems of the community, have emerged as a channel for addressing some of the abusive issues that women face in their families, relationships, and marriages. Most of the songs communicate a number of difficult issues, including dissatisfaction with the way their men treat them. Having explored the circumstances surrounding women initiates, one cannot predict how many of the initiates will actually practise as diviners. However, one can argue that those who do will make strong diviners who will empower other women in particular. These women are not the first or the last in the history of the abuse of women under patriarchy in Zwelibomvu. For rural and poor communities like this one, folk genres—in this case songs—serve as poetic license to break the silence and assist women in finding a public voice of protest to confront patriarchal authority and to expose their experiences of abuse and oppression. In this sense, through folk songs, women communicate a number of issues which affect mainly women in patriarchal societies. They serve a paramount function where concerns addressed in them would, under normal circumstances be censored.

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Biographical Note

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[1] It must be noted that there are other factors that might lead to *ukuthwasa*, but these are beyond the scope of this article. Also, both genders may undergo diviner initiation.
[2] *Bahlabelelelani* is a Zulu phrase meaning 'Why do they sing?'
[3] While the name of the place is Masomini, the clan surname is a shortened version, hence Msomi.
[4] There are three forms of polygamy: polygyny involves a man married to several wives; polyandry is where one woman is married to several husbands; group marriage is an arrangement where several husbands are married to several wives in a combination of polygyny and polyandry

(Zeitzen 2008, 3; Anapol 2010, 162). Polygyny is the variety practised in Zwelibomvu, alongside some degree of monogamy.

[5] As song occupies such an important place in the life of the Zwelibomvu community (from cradle to grave), it is not possible to list all channels of circulation.

[6] This is a pseudonym and code for the female diviner under whom the initiates were placed for the duration of their training.

[7] All initiates seemed to embrace the opportunity as if I were some kind of rescuer. At least this was how I felt by the time each one had shared her story.

[8] This is a pseudonym and a code for the participant. All participants were given both pseudonyms and codes to ensure anonymity.

[9] Euphemism meaning protected sex.

[10] It is a common phenomenon for the young girls in the community studied to go for virginity-testing. There is no imposition, but every self-respecting girl takes pride in associating herself with this tradition. While in most districts a virginity-testing event takes place twice a year, there is a provincial one hosted by the King of the Zulu nation annually. Known as Umkhosi woMhlanga (Reed Ceremony) this takes place at eNyokeni, one of the King's homesteads, and attracts girls from all over the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In recent years other provinces have begun to send their virgins to participate in this ceremony whose popularity grows by year.

[11] https://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Polygamy-no-excuse-for-illegitimate-children-Zulu-experts-20150430. Ntshangase was responding in the *City Press* newspaper to the news of the then President of the Republic of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, a confessed polygamist, who had acknowledged that he had fathered a child out of wedlock with a daughter of the football boss, Irvin Khoza.

[12] I find this elucidation quite interesting, as the authors do not belong to Zulu society. This observation would have escaped me, as I take it for granted since I belong to the group and have always known the situation to be as they describe it.

[13] The Nguni are a larger grouping of Bantu peoples who mainly speak the Nguni languages isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, and Seswati. Their cultural practices and belief systems are mostly shared.