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In memory of my mother, Marianne.

1954-2010

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Introduction

"The first sign was that I began dreaming of snakes," Lindiwe told me. It was a hot February day in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, and Lindiwe was sitting next to her girlfriend Zandile in a small room, tucked away at the back of an office block in the city's center. They were casually but stylishly dressed, both wearing blue jeans and leather jackets, Lindiwe with her braids swept back into a ponytail and Zandile with cropped hair. On this occasion we were discussing signs they had detected over the past year that led them to suspect Lindiwe might have an ancestral calling, as they termed it. "There was a particular dream where a snake started talking to me," Lindiwe remembered. "It said, 'I have a gift for you,'" she went on, her voice bright with intrigue. "I told Zandile about it," Lindiwe said, looking at her girlfriend. "I tell her all my dreams; no one can interpret them like she can. She wasn't sure, but she thought the snake could mean I have *amadlozi*."

As Lindiwe mentioned the word *amadlozi*, Zandile pursed her lips and nodded; it was a serious and intimidating prospect. *Amadlozi* is the Ndebele term for powerful ancestral spirits,[1] who watch over their descendants and promote their flourishing by bestowing gifts like healing,

[1] Ndebele is spoken by around 15% of Zimbabwe's population and is the most widely-spoken language in Bulawayo and Matabeleland region, where this study is situated. Zimbabwe's largest language group is Shona, spoken by over 80% of Zimbabweans.

The term *amadlozi* (sing. = *idlozi*) refers specifically to the spirits of powerful ancestors, with gifts like healing, rainmaking, and hunting. The gifts of individual ancestral spirits reflect those of highly respected and important vocations in the precolonial world, like healers, hunters, and rainmakers. Today, these skills are expanded to encompass equivalent areas of contemporary life; for instance, hunter and rainmaking spirits are often asked for help with financial endeavors.

The closest equivalent term to *amadlozi* in Shona is *mhondoro*, and most literature on Zimbabwe uses this term. As I explain in Chapter 1, the semantics of the term *amadlozi* differs slightly from that of *mhondoro*, reflecting the historical influences of both Nguni groups to the south as well as Shona, Tonga, and other groups in the Zimbabwean region on the cosmologies of Matabeleland.

fertility, and the restoration of balance in relations between people. *Amadlozi* are inherited from one generation to the next through lines of genealogical descent, yet the spirits themselves choose which member of a given generation will act as their host, a role known as a *sangoma*.[2] But against the backdrop of a social landscape dominated by Christian churches, *amadlozi* and their *sangoma* mediums are widely perceived to be both spiritually dangerous and socially backwards. In contemporary Zimbabwe, talking openly about consulting with a *sangoma* or soliciting help from *amadlozi* is a delicate matter that few publicly admit to.[3] Indeed, Lindiwe, Zandile, and I were speaking in the privacy of this small room so we could discuss their experiences freely; even among some of their closest friends, talk of *amadlozi* would be liable to raise eyebrows.

Zandile knew enough about *amadlozi* to suspect the snake in Lindiwe's dream was a sign of a potent ancestral presence, but her knowledge of the broader cosmology in which ancestors were embedded was patchy. Among members of Lindiwe and Zandile's demographic—young, urban, and educated Zimbabweans who are active members of Christian churches—it is rare to hear *amadlozi* discussed in anything other than negative terms. Since the colonization of Zimbabwe in the late nineteenth century, spiritual practices involving ancestors have been pushed further and further to the margins of public life. The wrenching of people from rural

[2] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *sangoma* (diviner) as a gloss for spirit mediumship in general, encompassing the related but distinct role of the *inyanga* (herbalist). Specifically, the term *sangoma* refers to people who undertake divination—that is, use spirits to identify the cause of a particular malady, be it physical or social—whereas *inyangas* are experts in the use of plant- and animal-based medicines for healing purposes. Both receive insights from ancestral and other spirits (such as human, water, and animal spirits), of which *amadlozi* are the most significant, and a number of mediums are both *sangomas* and *inyangas*. The equivalent Shona terms are *svikiro* and *nanga*, respectively.

[3] A number of interlocutors noted that Zimbabwe stands out from other regional countries in this regard, especially in contrast to South Africa, where indigenous spiritual practices have undoubtedly been shaped and undermined by colonialism but continue to have mainstream saliency. See Ezra Chitando (2001) on the difficulties of teaching ancestral spirituality in Zimbabwean universities, an index of the social status of ancestral religious practices in the country.

lifeways in the early twentieth century unsettled the role of ancestral spirits in the reproduction of communal life and embeddedness in material landscapes. At the same time, the gradual spread of Christianity and modernizing impulses of the colonial state increasingly chiseled away at the social significance and moral status of ancestral practices. In recent decades Pentecostal churches have demonized ancestral practices as never before, framing ancestors as satanic beings who threaten the health and wellbeing of the living. This is the stance of the youth-oriented Pentecostal church that Lindiwe and Zandile attend, where her dream about a snake is more likely to be read as an indication of an ancestral curse requiring exorcism than the sign of a spiritual gift. Today, ancestral practices are generally viewed by young people in the city as the province of older, poorer, and rural people, who are perceived to be the most inclined to participate in "traditional" activities because they lack the education and resources to know otherwise. For young urban people, in contrast, spiritual salvation and social advancement are best pursued in Christian settings, especially rapidly growing Pentecostal congregations. Because of this, many young city dwellers grow up with little knowledge of ancestral practices, and little inclination to seek them out.

Among young queer people in Bulawayo like Lindiwe and Zandile, however, there is a striking resurgence of interest in ancestral practices.[4] Unlike other young Zimbabweans, not only are many queer people searching for information about ancestors, but a growing number experience ancestral spirits trying to communicate with them and contemplate the possibility

[4] As I describe in the penultimate section of this chapter, most of my interlocutors were between the ages of 20-35 and I refer to them as "young people" as a shorthand. I use the term "queer" throughout this dissertation to refer to gender and sexual transgression in the broadest sense. While the term is English in origin and there is no equivalent in Ndebele, many of my research participants prefer the term "queer" because it avoids the derogatory connotations of Ndebele-language terminology and the fixity of identity categories like "gay" and "homosexual." Where I invoke specific identity terms, I reflect the language people use to describe themselves. For more on the use of the term "queer" in African contexts, see Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (2013) and Danai Mupotsa et al. (2020).

they have been chosen by ancestral spirits to work as their mediums—an ancestral "calling," as Lindiwe described it. After Lindiwe told Zandile about her dream, together they began to piece together a pattern of mysterious signs, particularly dreams that spoke with precision to the challenges they faced and often seemed to anticipate future events. After several weeks of uncertainty about what to do, Zandile proposed they consult with a *sangoma*. This was a prospect they would never have contemplated just a few years earlier, but as a trained expert a *sangoma* would be best placed to discern the presence and nature of Lindiwe's ancestral spirits. The *sangoma* they visited—a transwoman referred to them by a friend[5]—confirmed that Lindiwe had indeed been chosen by *amadlozi*. They were both taken aback by this news, but it spoke to their growing conviction that ancestral spirits were present and active in their lives.

Learning more about *amadlozi* not only involved seeking out people and ideas they had been taught to shun, but also reorganizing their perceptions of spiritual benevolence, recalibrating their understandings of themselves and their familial spirits, and rearranging some of their closest relationships. Even in the early days of exploring Lindiwe's calling, she and Zandile discovered that attempting to form relationships with *amadlozi* was a volatile and unpredictable process. Indeed, Lindiwe and Zandile came to have doubts about this particular *sangoma's* advice, and they soon learned that determining who to trust on the path of gathering information about *amadlozi* would be difficult. Each spirit had distinctive powers that others could seek to appropriate for themselves and there existed complex networks of relations among spirits. Equally, at times their deep apprehensions about *amadlozi* ingrained since childhood resurfaced and they came to question the path they were pursuing. As such, they looked to other queer friends for guidance as well as social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube, where an

[5] I return to the experience of the *sangoma* that Lindiwe and Zandile consulted with in Chapter 4, where I discuss the relationship between her gender expression and her status as a *sangoma* in greater depth.

increasing number of *sangomas* had an online presence. Ultimately, they decided to try to develop a relationship with Lindiwe's *amadlozi* on their own before figuring out who to trust with her spiritual development. "I think it's what brought us together," Lindiwe said, looking at Zandile. "We're working this out between us."

This dissertation examines the intersection between queer life and ancestral spirituality in contemporary Zimbabwe. In the context of widespread discourses that frame queer people as irreligious—evident in the pronouncements of local political and religious leaders, as well as those of proponents of the transnational gay rights movement—this dissertation argues that religious exploration is a vital arena of queer creativity and resilience in Zimbabwe. It follows the spiritual trajectories of members of several queer rights organizations in Bulawayo, investigating both their frustrations with various forms of religious practice and creative endeavors to remake them in their own image. In particular, it explores the complex place of Christianity in the lives of queer Zimbabweans, a space of childhood socialization and deep moral conflict regarding disjunctures between doctrine and lived experience, especially when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality. Pentecostal churches provide a distinctive perspective on Christianity, one that enables queer people to interrogate the limits of Christian orthodoxy and cultivate new ways of thinking about spiritual authority. For those who reconsider and eventually embrace ancestral spirituality, ancestral spirits promise protection, healing, kinship, and intimacy—the very qualities they most desire in an often hostile social environment. And as they draw on varied sources to remake ancestral spirituality, they articulate distinctively queer theologies and play a role in reshaping Zimbabwe's broader religious landscape.

This dissertation investigates of the following questions: Why are young queer Zimbabweans drawn to ancestral practices, and how does their uptake of ancestral spirituality

serve to transform it? In answering these questions, I make three interlocking arguments. First, I argue that Pentecostal Christianity plays an unexpectedly central role in queer people's emergent interest in ancestral practices. In encouraging adherents to develop a personal relationship with God, Pentecostal churches lay the groundwork for them to diverge from key aspects of their doctrine, particularly homophobic biblical interpretations and hostility to ancestors. Regardless of individual participation in Pentecostalism, ideas about having a personal relationship with God have shaped how young Zimbabweans think about their spiritual agency, giving rise to a broader skepticism towards received doctrine and an openness to pursuing idiosyncratic spiritual trajectories. Second, I show that queer Zimbabweans draw on ideas from a variety of sources—including queer activism, Pentecostal churches, and social media—to reinvent the ancestral spirituality of older generations. By engaging with ancestors through the lens of concepts they encounter in both religious and secular spaces, they transform ancestral spirituality and situate themselves as prime bearers of ancestral authority. Third, I contend that queer people in Bulawayo are at the forefront of wider projects to articulate distinctively African queer subjectivities. In turning to ancestral traditions, they refuse the pathologizing discourses of local political and religious leaders, who reject the possibility of queer flourishing on the grounds of defending "African tradition." Conversely, young queer Zimbabweans draw on the archives of African metaphysics to nuance the categories of the global gay rights movement, which are derived from struggles for queer liberation fought elsewhere. Overall, I suggest, queer Zimbabweans' embrace and reinvention of ancestral traditions represents an innovative effort to redefine the contours of queer subjectivity and forge novel theological imaginations.

The Politicization of Queerness

In turning to ancestors, young queer Zimbabweans complicate popular narratives that call into question the so-called "Africanness" of queer intimacies. These ideas are at the heart of powerful and often hegemonic discourses that have tried to set firm boundaries on queer life across Africa in recent decades—and, in some cases, sought to erase it altogether. Prominent political and religious leaders have argued that homosexuality is both alien to and incompatible with African culture, and have rejected calls for the expansion of gay rights across the continent (Coly, 2013). One of the most forceful proponents of this line of argument was Zimbabwe's former president Robert Mugabe, who played an instrumental role in injecting debates about queer sexualities into mainstream African politics (Dunton & Palmberg, 1996). In his discussion of homosexuality, Mugabe notably made a series of claims about the past in a bid to monopolize accounts of "authentic" African culture in the present (Cole, 1998). Specifically, he argued that precolonial African societies were premised on heterosexual patterns of marriage and patriarchal gender relations, which in his view precluded the possibility of queer presence in Africa prior to European colonization. At the same time, he frequently invoked Christian and colonial idioms of sexual morality, especially those that frame homosexuality as a sin and posit heterosexual marriage as the ideal site for intimacy and reproduction (Chitando, 2020). As his tying together of precolonial African culture and Christianity suggests, Mugabe's arguments concealed deeper histories of negotiation over morality and intimacy in Zimbabwe that stretch back to the dawn of the colonial era. In this section, I investigate the historical and contemporary debates that form the backdrop to queer life in contemporary Zimbabwe and highlight the strands of argument that young queer people creatively contest and rework today.

While Zimbabwe is a small country with a population of just 15 million on a continent of more than 1.2 billion, Mugabe was a leading voice in the cultivation of a genre of homophobic political rhetoric that swept across Africa in the 2000s.[6] For almost four decades he was the gravitational center of Zimbabwean politics, and even among those who vigorously opposed him he frequently succeeded in setting the terms of debate in the country (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015b).[7] Despite his reviled status in the West, for many in Africa Mugabe remained an anticolonial icon who refused to let former colonial powers downplay the ongoing legacy of colonization. Starting in the 1990s, homophobia came to have a strikingly central place in his rhetoric.[8] In 1995, in the midst of a controversy over the presence of the activist organization Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair—then one of the country's foremost cultural events—Mugabe first framed queerness as a threat to the nation (Aarmo, 1999). In a speech at the opening of the Fair, he described GALZ as an "organization of sodomists and perverts" and rejected nascent calls for the expansion of gay rights in the country. Just a couple of months later at the annual Heroes' Day celebrations—a key occasion for the remembrance of the country's liberation struggle—he infamously described queer people as "worse than pigs and dogs" and claimed that homosexuality was fundamentally alien to African culture (ibid.).

The remark about pigs and dogs was so memorable that it was frequently recalled by my interlocutors during fieldwork as an encapsulation of homophobic attitudes in Zimbabwe, even

[6] Exact population data for Zimbabwe is hard to ascertain due to high levels of outward migration. As of 2022, the World Bank estimates Zimbabwe's population to be 14.86 million (World Bank, 2022).

[7] Mugabe was Prime Minister from 1980-87, combined that role with the Presidency in 1987, which he held until the coup of 2017, a total of 37 years in power.

[8] Keguro Macharia (2015) has argued against foregrounding voices like Mugabe and identifying the 1990s as the moment of emergence for "African homophobia." I reiterate these tropes here in order to illuminate how ideas about "the precolonial" and Christian sexual morality have become part of the debate about queerness in Africa, which I trouble in subsequent sections.

among those born after the events of 1995. Yet it was his assertion about the incompatibility of queerness and African culture that became a recurrent motif in his speeches in subsequent years, over time seeping into the commonsense perspectives of many ordinary Zimbabweans. His line of argument that gay rights activism was the latest attempt by former colonial powers to interfere in and undermine African culture recalled Zimbabwe's violent history of settler colonialism.[9] In his telling, heterosexuality was the bedrock of an authentic African culture that had existed prior to colonization in the nineteenth century and homosexuality was presented as a modern and external threat (Nyanzi, 2013).[10] Moreover, Mugabe suggested that ancestors—spirits like those discussed by Lindiwe and Zandile above—would punish the living for allowing gay rights to gain a foothold in Zimbabwe. In his words, "The dead will rise against us."

Mugabe's positioning of himself as a defender of precolonial culture was interwoven with Christian idioms of sexual morality. He frequently invoked symbolically powerful biblical stories—like the heterosexual coupling of Adam and Eve, or the divine retribution inflicted on the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah—as evidence of the unambiguous hostility of Christian doctrine to homosexuality. These assertions reflected his personal Christian convictions. Mugabe had been educated in a Catholic mission school and famously described himself as having been "brought up by the Jesuits"; indeed, in later life he attributed his political success to the discipline instilled in him by Catholicism (Meredith, 2002). In his deployment of Christian morality for political ends, however, he was both selective and strategic (Mpofu, 2021). On a

[9] Zimbabwe was first colonized by Cecil Rhodes's British South African Company in the 1890s, becoming the British colony of Rhodesia in 1898. It remained a colony of the British Empire until 1965, when the white minority government unilaterally declared independence from Britain and existed as an apartheid state until independence in 1980. I discuss the history of the colonization of Zimbabwe in depth in Chapter 1.

[10] Mugabe's use of the past to make political points in the present reflects work by scholars like Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), Richard Werbner (1998), and Jennifer Cole (2001), which has shown how tellings and memories of the past shape political power and subjectivities in the present.

visit to the Vatican in 1998, for instance, he deflected attention from the Church's criticisms of political violence in Zimbabwe by requesting support for his opposition to gay rights. Invoking the specter of homosexuality, he asserted, "God did not create us this way," and went on, "It is a revulsion to us in Africa […] We pray that the Catholic Church will help correct this" (Gunda, 2010). These statements illustrate how Mugabe's homophobic rhetoric intertwined claims about authentic African culture with biblical injunctions against same-sex intimacies. In his account, precolonial social mores and Christian moral codes were entirely aligned in their antagonism to queer intimacies.

Inflaming debates about queer sexualities served as a potent and effective culture war issue, stoking moral anxieties in a bid to distract attention from Zimbabwe's deteriorating economic situation (Boellstorff, 2004; Mwikya, 2013).[11] In this respect Mugabe's speeches evinced a familiar tactic of populist speech: distilling broader concerns about social and economic change into the specter of out-of-control gender and sexual relations (Cole & Moore, 2020; Gal & Kligman, 2000). Moreover, his claims not only powerfully affected the conditions of queer life in Zimbabwe but also signaled the emergence of a new genre of homophobic political rhetoric that rapidly spread across the African continent. In time, it would come to be incorporated into the stance of leaders of countries as varied as Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, and Uganda (Biruk, 2014; Currier, 2018; Epprecht, 2008; Lorway, 2008). As recently as 2015, at the age of 91, Mugabe summed up his position when he told the United Nations General Assembly "We are not gays!", arguing, "We reject attempts to prescribe new rights that are contrary to our values, norms, traditions, and beliefs" (Buchanan, 2015).

[11] The mid-1990s were when Zimbabwe's economic woes began to become apparent, which would culminate in the late 2000s with spiraling hyperinflation and the collapse of the country's agricultural and industrial sectors. The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of a new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, and mass protests against Mugabe's rule (Muzondidya, 2009). I describe this period in greater detail in Chapter 1.

In the following two sections, I unpick the elisions and contradictions embodied in Mugabe's rhetoric on queer intimacies. In doing so, I unsettle the 1990s as the origin moment of "African homophobia" and trace the deeper histories that feed into the contemporary politics of sexuality in Zimbabwe (Macharia, 2015). First, I turn to the vexed question of gender and sexuality in the precolonial period, which has become both a sticking point in the literature on sexuality in Africa and an important touchstone in contemporary queer politics. The difficulty of telling this history via conventional archival methods makes countering Mugabe's rhetoric complex, yet I suggest that the very unknowability of this past opens it up as a site of queer creativity and possibility in the present. Next, I examine the role of sexuality in British colonialism and Christian missionization in the late nineteenth century, which introduced new epistemological categories and forged novel subjectivities. This history feeds into the politicization of homosexuality in contemporary Zimbabwe but also sowed the seeds for the emergence of queer political organizing. Taken together, tensions between ancestral cosmologies and Christian sexual ethics point to the complexity of Zimbabwe's spiritual landscape, which I turn to subsequently.

Queer Silences

In reality, it is incredibly difficult to access the ways in which precolonial African societies conceived of bodies and intimacies.[12] Southern African societies were premised on oral modes of storytelling, knowledge-sharing, memorializing, and historical record-keeping, and did not

[12] As I describe further in the next chapter, the societies of precolonial Zimbabwe were varied but were largely oriented around chiefship as a key institution of power. While in some cases large political entities emerged, like the Monomotapa Empire of the Zimbabwean plateau, power was generally concentrated over relatively small territories.

produce written documents.[13] Where archival sources do exist they largely reflect the voices of colonial figures and their vantage point on precolonial life is heavily skewed by both colonists' racialized prejudices and European epistemic and metaphysical categories (Mangcu, 2011; T. Richard, 1993).[14] Alternative methods for accessing this period—like oral histories and archeology—offer fragmentary access to the cosmologies of this era and are filtered through the conceptual categories brought about by the epistemic rupture of colonization (Oland et al., 2012; Weismantel, 2013). These difficulties mean that determining patterns of precolonial life in Southern Africa is a vexing undertaking, particularly when it comes to describing the lifeways of women and marginalized figures whose presence is already spectral or silenced in conventional archives (Fuentes, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2005). When trying to make specific claims regarding how these societies conceived of the body, identity, and desire—that is, the idioms that underpin ideas about gender and sexuality (Bernault, 2019; Butler, 1993)—it is almost impossible to avoid projecting contemporary understandings onto the precolonial world (Mbah, 2019).[15]

The unknowability of the precolonial past poses a problem for those seeking to investigate queer presence in Africa prior to colonization. Following Mugabe's outbursts in the 1990s, a

[13] Such cultures of orality are well illustrated by the genre of praise poetry, which recorded genealogical lineages and historical events that stretched back centuries (Finnegan, 1970; Vail & White, 1991).

[14] The problem of the use of contemporary conceptual categories to interrogate the past is a version of a problem that afflicts anthropological theorizing in general, and entails questions of translation and the transposing of emic concepts into etic categories (Asad, 1986).

[15] These issues point to a broader problem with the very notion of "the precolonial" as an analytic category. In the first place, the category reinscribes colonization the fundamental moment of "before" and "after" in African history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). More generally, it reproduces European modernity as the baseline against which other histories exist. In this sense the precolonial is a prime example of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002) termed "alter-native" concepts; that is, categories of analysis that are defined primarily through their otherness to the "North Atlantic universals" of European modernity. Yet as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has pointed out, European categories of thought are deeply limited yet impossible to evade. For this reason I retain the precolonial insofar as it is an important discursive concept in contemporary Zimbabwe while engaging with its limitations in describing past realities.

cohort of historians produced a series of studies that sought to overcome the paucity of precolonial records, combing colonial archives for glimmers of same-sex practices and conducting oral histories in a bid to salvage memories of the precolonial (R. Morgan & Wieringa, 2005; Murray & Roscoe, 1998).[16] In the Zimbabwean context, Marc Epprecht (2004) employed such methods to provide evidence of same-sex intimacies during Zimbabwe's precolonial and early colonial periods. Drawing on oral histories with rural elders, Epprecht suggested there existed indigenous cosmological frameworks for conceptualizing homosexuality. Central to these schemes were ancestral spirits like those invoked by Lindiwe and Zandile at the opening of this dissertation. The type of spirits Lindiwe and Zandile describe—*amadlozi*—have significant influence over their hosts' lives, affecting their mannerisms, desires, and ways of being in the world. As such, Epprecht contended that gender transgression was sometimes understood to be caused by these spirits, implying that queerness might have been socially legible and even venerated in precolonial Zimbabwe.[17] In his words, "What we today would now term homosexual orientation or transgender identity was not necessarily an offence at all but a respected attribute if caused by certain types of spirit possession and manifested in certain ways" (2004, p. 35). By providing documentary evidence of queer presence in precolonial Southern Africa, Epprecht and others sought to provide a powerful rebuttal to Mugabe's rhetoric.

[16] These kinds of questions have long been central to queer studies and has spurred attempts to refute the notion of the historical novelty of queer intimacies in many contexts, a preoccupation evident in the work of Kenneth Dover (1978), John Boswell (1980), and David Halperin (1990). They also studies built on anthropological work on cross-cultural studies of "homosexuality," which was most prominently advocated by Gilbert Herdt (1981, 1984).

[17] In a similar vein, scholars working in South Africa have shown that *amadlozi* sometimes demand their *sangoma* mediums take same-sex partners, providing a legible space for queer co-habitation and intimacy (R. Morgan & Reid, 2003; Nkabinde & Morgan, 2006). More broadly, a wide range of anthropological studies have linked spirit possession to gender and sexual fluidity, arguing that spirit possession rites are inherently "liminal"—that is, boundary-crossing—and enable social roles to become malleable (Boddy, 1989; Fortes, 1965; Garbett, 1969; Lambek, 1998; McIntosh, 2002; Stoller, 1994; Turner, 1969). As such, gender and sexual categories can become fluid during spirit possession, potentially facilitating the reworking of normative subjectivities and the reordering of relationships (Hayes, 2011; Jacobs et al., 1997; Lewis, 1971; Morris, 2000; S. Palmer, 2021; Pinthongvijayakul, 2019; Piot, 1999).

While studies in this tradition were motivated by genuine desires to combat contemporary homophobia, to their critics they risked reproducing fraught conceptual and political dynamics that have dogged studies of sexuality in Africa. In the first place, these works deployed contemporary Western conceptual categories in their examination of the precolonial past, a move long critiqued by African feminist scholars (Nzegwu, 2006). In her groundbreaking *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), Ifi Amadiume argued that binary conceptions of biological sex and gender were not universal but had been introduced to Africa by missionaries and colonizers. In her account, the imposition of these categories disguised more fluid dynamics relating to gender and power in the precolonial era in which social roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized, enabling women to assume ostensibly "male" social roles like husband and chief.[18] In a parallel argument, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) contended that Western metaphysics is characterized by a unique fixation on the body as a site of truth and ascribes particular significance to bodily differences that are visually apparent, like anatomical difference. In Oyěwùmí's account, the gender binary and its social significance stems from this visual orientation to the body rather than a universal tendency to divide up the world and social power on the basis of biological sex. While these arguments were directed at Western feminists' claims about the inherent patriarchy of African societies, they also speak to the impulse of scholars to scour the precolonial past for clues of what today might be perceived as homosexuality. If gender did not operate according to binary logics in precolonial Africa, as Amadiume and Oyěwùmí suggest, then the very notion of "homosexuality" stands on shaky epistemic ground. Indeed, in this sense these works anticipate critiques by a range of scholars regarding the historical and

[18] For this reason, Amadiume argues that the need to distinguish between sex and gender is a problem unique to the modern West.

cultural specificity of contemporary Western ideas about sexuality, identity, and selfhood, as we shall see (Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990; Stoler, 1995).[19]

In the second place, critics highlighted the complex political stakes of seeking to recuperate precolonial intimate practices through standard archival methods. For some, attempts to find traces of "homosexuality" in the precolonial era were part of a broader project to interpellate individuals into the global gay rights movement (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan IV, 2002). Joseph Massad (2008) has argued that the universalization of Western sexual taxonomies and the conjuring of sexual subjects in the image of Western activists ought to be viewed as a form of epistemic and political violence veiled in the language of liberation. Neville Hoad (2007) has made a similar argument in the African context, contending that such efforts reflect longer histories of colonial fascination with African bodies and intimacies. In his words, "An identity politics of sameness, literally of appropriative identification, is potentially as harmful as the fetishizable difference of exoticism" (ibid., p. xxv).[20] For Anima Adjepong, historical studies of same-sex intimacies in Africa mimic colonial efforts to document African bodies and intimacies, centered as they are on the gaze of white scholars; in Adjepong's view, such work "reproduces African sexualities as in need of colonial classification" (2022, p. 292). For this reason, Adjepong argues for jettisoning the use of colonial-era archives in queer studies altogether (see also Macharia, 2015).

[19] Neville Hoad similarly critiqued such historical work for subsuming "a range of historical experiences and representations under the banners of sexuality and homosexuality" (2007, p. xxxii). In contrast, Hoad suggests that precolonial same-sex intimacies often articulated complex political relations —what he terms "African forms of embodied sovereignty" (ibid., p. xx)—that are rendered invisible by a strict focus on Western models of sexuality, with their emphasis on individual identity and desire. Likewise, Joseph Massad (2008) has made a similar argument about historical work that seeks to identify same-sex practices in premodern Middle Eastern contexts, suggesting that such efforts are a recent iteration of orientalist orientations towards the region and Islamic traditions more broadly.

[20] A corrective, in Hoad's view, is to interrogate how Africa became discursively tied up to ideas about sexuality during colonization, a history that continues to have echoes in the present.

Recent work in queer African studies has responded to the conceptual and political limitations of conventional archival methods by thinking more capaciously about what might constitute queer archives in Africa.[21] Rather than taking a strictly objectivist approach aimed at recovering evidence of sexual diversity from the past, this literature strives to find traces of gendered and sexual otherwises with a view to creating "usable traditions" in the present (Livermon, 2015; Mupotsa et al., 2020; Qambela, 2017). For Keguro Macharia (2019), objectivist approaches to conventional archives ultimately "refuse surprise, wonder, fantasy, and discovery" (2015, p. 142). Instead, he advocates alternative means of recovering fragments of queer pasts from non-traditional sources, in his case turning to the memoirs, novels, and political treatises of mid-twentieth century Black writers. For Macharia, finding queerness in these African-produced texts enables the pursuit of "a broader reparative goal: to find 'sustenance' where is has often been deemed absent or scarce" (2019, p. 5). Though he doesn't reach back to the precolonial *per se*, Macharia's approach suggests that elements of precolonial and ancestral cosmologies might be available for contemporary recuperation and lend themselves to the imagination of usable traditions today. From this perspective, the unknowability of the precolonial is not a limiting factor but opens up a variety of imaginative pathways and opportunities for creative reappropriation. But to appreciate how queer people creatively recuperate and reimagine these pasts in their articulation of queer theological imaginaries, we must first examine how "homosexuality" appeared in Zimbabwe and came to be the object of such intense moral and political concern.

[21] This work builds on approaches to queer archives in other contexts, such as that of Ann Cvetkovich (2003), Jack Halberstam (2005), and particularly literature on Black women's and queer archival absences, including Saidiya Hartman (2008), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008), Katherine McKittrick (2014), and Marisa Fuentes (2016).

The Afterlives of "Homosexuality"

The introduction of European ideas about sexuality during the early colonial era conjured novel categories of personhood that had no real precedent in precolonial Southern Africa.[22] The effect was the creation of new moral and legal categories—like sodomy, homosexuality, and public indecency—that religious and political institutions sought to identify and suppress. Zimbabwe was colonized during the last decades of the nineteenth century in the midst of the so-called Scramble for Africa, a history I detail in depth in the next chapter.[23] This period involved overt acts of violence, land dispossession, and the alienation of goods and wealth—that is, radical changes to material life—but also entailed significant ideological shifts. These changes reflected the fact that the manifold taxonomies used by Europeans to divide up the world didn't easily map onto existing metaphysical understandings (Keane, 2007; Stoler, 1995; Vaughan, 1991). The significance of these divergences between European and African epistemes was particularly visible in the intimate sphere, where missionaries and colonial bureaucrats undertook projects to refashion African domestic life (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; White, 1990). Such interventions imposed European moral and epistemic frameworks onto ideas about gender, marriage, desire, and physical intimacy, and sought to reform them in the image of nineteenth century ideals (Burke, 1996; Hunt, 1991; Stoler, 2002; Thomas, 2003). By introducing new models of personhood and identity, these interventions served to radically reshape how people thought about themselves and ultimately invented new classes of subjects (Barber, 2006; Bernault, 2006; Jeater, 2007; Wariboko, 2018).

[22] When I suggest that there was no precedent for "homosexuality" in precolonial Southern Africa, I do not mean to suggest that there were no same-sex intimacies prior to British colonization. Rather, I refer to the nexus of Christian moral principles and European idioms of the body that are bound up in the English-language concept of homosexuality, which were subsequently articulated in Southern African legal statutes in the nineteenth century.

[23] Prior to 1880, less than ten percent of the continent had been claimed by European powers; by 1914, over ninety percent was under European control (Boahen, 1987).

One of the most striking examples of the creation of a novel type of subject—one particularly relevant for this study—was the invention of "the homosexual." In the late nineteenth century, the figure of the homosexual had only recently emerged in European thought (D'Emilio, 1983; Halperin, 1990). As Michel Foucault (1978) influentially argued, the notion of "sexuality" emerged in the nineteenth century as a distinctive area of scientific research and social concern, giving rise to new modes of categorizing individuals on the basis of sexual practice. One of most significant new categories of sexual identity was organized around sexual "object choice"—that is, the sex of one's desired romantic partners—which underpinned a new binary distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990). Both of these categories served to shift the locus of identity inwards; rather than being a matter of group affiliation, like class status or ethnicity, sexual identities were individualized and discerned through medical and psychic evaluation (Hall, 2011; Sennett & Foucault, 1981; C. Taylor, 1989). While these ideas grew out of Christian traditions of self-reflection and contemplation—and were underpinned by Christian moral schemes concerning "normal" and desirable intimate practices—they involved a fundamentally new set of techniques for thinking about both the self and intimate desire (Boswell, 1980; P. Brown, 2008). Moreover, this period coincided with a surge of moral and political anxiety about sexuality, which served to dramatically increase the volume of discourse about it.

It was this modernist understanding of sexual identity that colonial figures brought with them to Africa and became a distinct concern in the colonies of the British Empire (Han & O'Mahoney, 2014). This emphasis on sexuality reflected fears about the vast imbalance between Black and white populations as well as racist caricatures about the "excesses" of African sexuality (McClintock, 1995; McCulloch, 2000; Wieringa, 2009). As Hoad has described,

colonies in Southern African sought to regulate sexual behavior in "both instrumental and paranoid modes" (2011, p. 120). These interventions involved both direct legal prohibitions, criminalizing same-sex and interracial intimacies, as well as more subtle attempts to undermine cultural institutions like polygamy and the payment of bridewealth (Hunt, 1991; Jeater, 1993). The first legislation that explicitly targeted same-sex intimacies in a British colony was Section 337 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860, which outlawed "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal" (Gupta, 2013), and targeted same-sex intimacies under the rubric of sodomy. This legislation was frequently imported word for word into the legislative frameworks of other British colonies, including that of Zimbabwe. From the first decade of the colonization of Zimbabwe in the 1890s, at a time when the number of white settlers remained in the hundreds, these laws were zealously enforced (Epprecht, 2004, p. 105).[24]

These epistemic, scientific, and legal developments were amplified by distinctive aspects of white colonial culture, which would also leave their imprint on contemporary attitudes towards same-sex intimacies in Zimbabwe. Those who settled Rhodesia—as Zimbabwe was then known—imagined themselves as frontier people whose destiny was to tame an unruly natural environment. In this context, settlers believed social stability depended upon white men ruling over both Black people and white women (Parpart, 2007). Moreover, given that white men vastly outnumbered white women, Rhodesian society came to be characterized by a masculinist "cowboy" culture and "cult of virility," which defined itself in opposition to the liberal and effeminate men of the British metropole (Epprecht, 2005, p. 156). By the mid-twentieth century

[24] As this emphasis on sodomy suggests, sex between men was of preeminent concern to missionaries and colonial authorities, whereas female same-sex intimacies were far less visible and threatening to the settler state (R. Morgan & Wieringa, 2005). The first time the Rhodesian state explicitly articulated hostility to female same-sex intimacies was the Immorality Act of 1969, which banned dildos in a bid to deter "immoral and indecent behaviour" among women (Epprecht, 2004, p. 147).

Rhodesia had become a settler colony with a large white population, yet concerns regarding gender and sexuality persisted. As a growing number of African countries secured independence in the 1950s and 60s, Rhodesia's white minority refused to give up its monopoly on the country's economic and political power, resisting Britain's requirement to enfranchise all members of the adult population in order to gain independence (White, 2015). Eventually Rhodesia unilaterally declared independence in 1965, which paved the way for a decade-long guerrilla war for Black liberation and majority rule. Against the backdrop of civil war, white Rhodesians increasingly imagined themselves as the last defenders of colonial values that were being maligned and abandoned elsewhere (Godwin & Hancock, 1993). As the sexual revolution began to shift attitudes towards gender roles and same-sex intimacies in many Western countries, Rhodesian society sought to preserve idealized imaginings of the sexual relations of the early colonial era (Kufakurinani, 2018).

After a long and bitterly fought guerrilla struggle, Zimbabwe eventually gained independence in 1980. In the first elections, Robert Mugabe came to power as prime minister alongside Canaan Banana as president. While members of the liberation movement had vociferously opposed racialized power structures, liberation leaders were almost universally male and their rhetoric was often explicitly masculinist. Its figureheads sometimes invoked idioms of emasculation to describe the experience of Black men under colonial domination, and for some decolonization promised a return to their vision of precolonial gender relations (Charumbira, 2015). As a result, in the post-independence era women's bodies frequently became the site for the policing of national morality (Law, 2021; McClintock, 1993; C. M. Shaw, 2015). These dynamics became explicit in Mugabe's efforts to undermine his opponents in the 1980s, when he frequently targeted both their masculinity and sexuality. When Joshua Nkomo—

the leader of the parallel liberation movement ZAPU who was affectionately known as "Father Zimbabwe"—went into exile in 1983, Mugabe's government claimed he had fled the country dressed as a woman. Nkomo insisted this story was a politically-motivated attempt to discredit him, but the rumor persisted (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2007). In the 1990s, Zimbabwe's first president Canaan Banana was tried and convicted of a number of charges of sodomy and assault against men. He vociferously denied these allegations and insisted they were politically motivated, but they nevertheless resulted in his public fall from grace.[25] Ultimately, such accusations served to shore up Mugabe's power and buttress his image as the unchallenged defender of national morality.

These currents all fed into Mugabe's weaponizing of homophobia in the 1990s. Not coincidentally, his 1990s speeches were delivered in the context of rapidly shifting attitudes towards homosexuality in the West and the globalization of gay rights activism (Puar, 2007). Gradually, in many countries of Europe and North America the medical pathologization and legal criminalization of homosexuality was undone. Activist movements coined new terms to describe sexual identities like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, paving the ways for the emergence of LGBT rights as a focus of political organizing (Altman, 2001). Increasingly, sexual rights gained traction as one of a broader set of identity-based rights, such as those protecting race, gender, and religion (Goodale, 2008). It was against this backdrop that Zimbabwe's first sexual rights organization—Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)—emerged. GALZ grew out of a series of grassroots social organizations for queer people in the nation's capital, Harare. In the beginning, GALZ was largely comprised of white gay men and

[25] Banana's wife later confirmed that he was gay and had relationships with several men that she knew about, though insisted the charges of sodomy were politically motivated. In her words, "Mugabe used the issue of my husband's sexuality as a way of mobilising opinion against Canaan […] the attack on Canaan was an attempt to eliminate any hint of opposition" (R. Taylor, 2002).

lesbian women with the aim of reaching queer Black people in the city's high density suburbs (Aarmo, 1999). Indeed, throughout the 1990s GALZ was largely led by white gay men, which lent credibility to the notion that it was a culturally foreign organization that was little more than a cover for the advancement of "Western values," as its critics alleged.[26] This made it an easy target for politicians like Mugabe, especially as it was financially supported by Western gay rights organizations that often inadvertently reproduced tropes about African "backwardness" in their campaigns for gay rights (Biruk, 2014). But such attacks obscured the reality that over time GALZ's leadership and membership became almost entirely Black, and a new generation of queer Zimbabweans cast themselves as queer rights activists who sought to transform attitudes towards queerness in Zimbabwe in their own right.

The conditions of contemporary queer life in Southern Africa are shaped by this complex legacy. On the one hand, queer people grapple with multifaceted genealogies of homophobia that draw on many sources: Christian sexual ethics, colonial legal frameworks, the Rhodesian cult of masculinity, and the masculinism of African nationalism. On the other hand, they borrow the English-language identity categories of Western gay rights activism and are largely reliant on Western organizations for financial support. While this leaves them vulnerable to accusations that they are little more than puppets of the West, members of GALZ are far from passive actors who are unwittingly molded into the foot soldiers of the global gay rights movement. Many passionately embrace English-language identity terms over local idioms describing gender variance as a means of contesting the negative semantics of vernacular languages. More broadly,

[26] Notably, fears about the influence of Western gay rights activism also unfolded as the HIV epidemic reached its height in the 1990s. Although HIV in the African context was not associated so closely with gay men, the epidemic gave rise to a broader concerns about sexual promiscuity and campaigns to police normative sexual intimacies (Hunter, 2010; Parikh, 2016). HIV was never considered a "gay" illness in Southern Africa as it was in the West, given that it affected between 25-30% of Zimbabwe's population at its peak (UNAIDS, 2004). Nonetheless, the broader sexual panic in light of the HIV epidemic did affect queer people and queer rights activism in Africa often centers HIV interventions (Nguyen, 2005).

they creatively receive and recontextualize ideas about gender and sexuality from the outside and utilize them to make arguments specific to the Zimbabwean context (Boellstorff, 2003; Gal, 2003; Matebeni, 2014).

Nonetheless, the global gay rights movement frequently frames queer Africans as victims of religious persecution, reflecting broader Western understandings that the domains of religion and sexuality are fundamentally antagonistic to one another (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003). Paradoxically, this means that Western gay rights activism sometimes parallels Mugabe's rhetoric in its denial of religion as a site of queer flourishing. As we shall see, young queer people's varied spiritual practices demonstrate that religious life is a significant arena of queer creativity in contemporary Zimbabwe. In order to grasp the significance of the queer spiritual quests at the heart of this dissertation, we must first understand Zimbabwe's dynamic religious landscape and the long dialogue between ancestors and Christianity, which provides the materials that my interlocutors imaginatively rework into queer theologies of their own.

A Polyontological Landscape

Just as the emergence of homosexuality as a conceptual category served to reconfigure how people imagined bodily intimacies in the late nineteenth century, the arrival of Christianity posed a radical confrontation to precolonial metaphysics. Precolonial metaphysical orders were vitalist; in the words of Clapperton Mavhunga, in this world "every facet of life was spiritual" (2014, p. 24). Spirits animated the landscape and mediated relations between people. There existed a creator God—Mwari—but ancestors were the more immediate and pivotal actors who acted as crucial intermediaries between the world of the living and that of spirits (Nyathi, 2015). Ancestral spirits were important social actors who served to connect political power to the

authority of the dead, ensured the fertility of people and land, and facilitated relations between members of broad lineage groups (J. Alexander et al., 2000; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009b; Ranger, 1999). In return, members of their lineages provided ancestors with the forms of care and attention they required through offerings, ceremonies, and memorializing activities. Such activities served to sustain ancestors, who relied on the bodily materiality of their descendants to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds (Hove, 2013). Moreover, certain individuals—namely chiefs and spirit mediums—had privileged access to ancestral spirits and were essential intermediaries between ancestors and their descendants.

Early colonial figures and missionaries denigrated these institutions, the effects of which were twofold. First, colonists described certain elements of these broad vitalist cosmologies—particularly ritual acts like rainmaking ceremonies and funerary rites—as "religious" in nature. In essence, certain ancestral practices came to be viewed through the lens of the English-language term religion in the early colonial period, and in the process *became* religion (Asad, 1983; Fitzgerald, 1997; Nongbri, 2015; Sahlins, 2022; J. Z. Smith, 1998).[27] At the same time, the embeddedness of ancestors in other aspects of social life—from political power to kin relations to the management of the natural landscape—was obscured.[28] Second, colonial figures viewed indigenous cosmologies as at best incoherent and at worst "heathen" practices that were responsible for Africans' suffering, and ultimately sought to eradicate them. In their attempts to win converts, missionaries established schools, taught literacy, and became fluent in local

[27] Mindful of these critiques of the historical and cultural specificity of the term "religion," I deploy it throughout this dissertation to reflect its usage among my interlocutors and in broader Zimbabwean social life. Doing so reflects contemporary understandings in Zimbabwe that certain activities—like prayer, biblical study, church attendance, or ritual participation—are distinctively "religious" in nature. Among many young people "religion" exists as a conceptual counterpoint to "spirituality," as I describe in detail in Chapter 2.

[28] Anthropological studies have often sought to complicate notions of "ancestor worship" by highlighting the ways in which ancestors structure political life (Fortes, 1965; Gluckman, 1937; J. Goody, 1962; Kopytoff, 1971).

languages (Harries, 2001). When they translated the Bible from English into the vernacular, they exercised considerable influence over the semantic associations of important concepts in the hopes of determining how the Christian message would be received. In doing so, they frequently translated words that described ancestral spirits and other divine figures in negative terms, using them as equivalents to English words like "Satan" or "demons" (Meyer, 1999). Likewise, the most visible practitioners of ancestral traditions like *sangomas* were rendered as "witch doctors" and targeted for eradication (Garbett, 1998).

Such efforts to both control the reception of Christianity and reconfigure understandings of ancestors were never fully successful and missionaries were often deeply frustrated by their inability to determine the uptake of their message. Mission churches gradually made strides but often found that some of the most passionate advocates of movements to "cleanse" religious life of precolonial practices were converts themselves (Fields, 1985; Maxwell, 1995). While many converts became passionate preachers of the new gospel, others broke away from mission churches and founded their own congregations. Equally, some congregations emerged that sought to integrate elements of precolonial cosmologies with ancestral practices, giving rise to a plethora of new syncretic denominations (Chitando & Adogame, 2016; Engelke, 2007). From the earliest days of missionary presence, then, Christianity became an African religion with a diverse array of local articulations. Moreover, despite efforts towards their suppression, Christianity entered into an enduring dialogue with ancestral practices. Ancestors would prove to be resilient, able to adapt and be redeployed under changing social and political conditions, and many people found ways to continue participating in ancestral rites alongside Christian worship (Cole & Middleton, 2001; Garbett, 1969; Lambek, 1998; Lan, 1985; Mavhunga, 2014).[29] This gave rise to

[29] In Zimbabwe, ancestral spirits became a key means of organizing resistance to colonial occupation and reorganizing power relations in a changing society (Charumbira, 2015; Chitakure, 2017; Comaroff, 1985; Lan,

what Maurice T. Vambe (1999) has described as a distinctively African form of "double consciousness." Borrowing the concept from W.E.B. Du Bois (2014), Vambe uses it to refer not only to dual racial consciousness but to a plural spiritual and metaphysical consciousness. For Vambe, the endurance of ancestral practices alongside the expansion of Christianity gave Zimbabweans an awareness of multiple "ways of knowing and organizing reality" (1999, p. 53).

Following the dramatic ascendence of forms of charismatic Christianity known as Pentecostalism in the late twentieth century, however, scholars began to argue that the interplay between the old and the new was giving way to a more radical rupture. Early literature on Christianity in Africa had emphasized the ways in which Africans "localized" Christianity to meet their spiritual needs, often integrating elements of ancestral spirituality into Christianity (Comaroff, 1985; Fernandez, 1964; Peel, 1968a; Sundkler, 1948). More recent work contended that Pentecostalism ought to be understood on its own terms as a "break with the past," highlighting in particular its radical rejection of ancestral traditions (Gifford, 1988; Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2007). This created an intractable debate in the literature on Pentecostalism in which continuity and rupture became polarized analytic frameworks (A. H. Anderson, 2018; Engelke, 2010; Englund, 2007; Lindhardt, 2015; Maxwell, 2006). This dissertation departs from these approaches by contesting the notion that Pentecostalism represents a straightforward "rupture" with what came before. Rather, I conceptualize Pentecostalism as one of several sources of novel perspectives on the self, personhood, and the otherworldly that have reshaped spiritual practice in contemporary Zimbabwe. Moreover, I show that the injection of new ideas and practices does not simply serve to reconfigure Christian traditions and marginalize ancestors, but also leads to

1985; Ranger, 1967). Notably, spirit mediums (*sangomas*) were prominent leaders of the resistance to the establishment of the colonial state in the 1890s and to white minority rule in the 1970s. I discuss the history of ancestors in the resistance to the colonial and independent Rhodesian state in greater depth in Chapter 1.

the reworking and reorientation of ancestral traditions.[30] At the same time, elements of precolonial cosmologies remain available for appropriation, not as static or unchanging "authentic" traditions but as strands of thought and practice that constitute dynamic African metaphysical archives in the contemporary.

In examining how young queer people traverse Zimbabwe's highly plural religious landscape, I borrow Janet McIntosh's (2019) concept of "polyontology." McIntosh coins this term to move beyond the limitations of the concept of syncretism while seeking to describe the distinctive plural religious landscapes of Southern and Eastern Africa.[31] As in Zimbabwe, McIntosh describes that in Tanzania multiple forms of spiritual potency are recognized but associated with distinct traditions and sites of religious practice. As McIntosh states, "In its clearest form, polyontologism is an emic stance (an attitude recognized by cultural insiders, in other words) of religious plurality that acknowledges the mystical potency (the ontological reality) of more than one set of religious or cosmological forces; marks these religious ontologies as distinct (by, for instance, marking their respective symbols and practices as embedded in different semiotic, historical, or ethnic contexts, or even marking their premises as contradictory); and considers all of the ontologies in question as eligible to be propitiated or interacted with by the same person or persons" (ibid., p. 117). McIntosh's perspective underlines the reality that those advocating the abandonment of ancestral practices unavoidably remain in dialogue with the "others" they so vociferously oppose. In general, I utilize the notion of polyontology as an analytic framework for capturing the dynamic trajectories that people forge

[30] As I argue in Chapter 2, one of Pentecostalism's most significant innovations is its introduction of a new conception of the Christian deity, which emphasizes the capacity for individuals to form a personal relationship with God and calls into question pastoral authority (Luhrmann, 2012; Wuthnow, 1998).

[31] For the evolving debate on the concept of syncretism, see J.D.Y. Peel (1968b), Johannes Fabian (1985), Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart (1994), Stephan Palmié (1995), Thomas Kirsch (2004), and Pattana Kitiarsa (2005).

across Zimbabwe's spiritual landscape, which rarely restrict themselves to any one site or tradition of religious practice in the long run (see also Kalu, 2008; Olupona, 2000; Premawardhana, 2018a).[32]

While drawing on McIntosh's framework, I depart from her perspective in one key way. Where McIntosh stresses the distinctiveness of each tradition and the boundaries between them, I focus on efforts to shore up boundaries between traditions and the inevitable gaps and moments of failure that such projects entail. I suggest that it is in the interplay between forms and sites of spiritual potency—and the divergent ideas that emerge from them—that opens up space for creative spiritual exploration and the emergence of novel forms of spiritual practice. Moreover, because many religious spaces prove to be challenging for queer people to inhabit long term, I show that young queer Zimbabweans are particularly adept at picking up and refashioning elements from each of them. In the process, they become innovative spiritual bricoleurs, integrating not only aspects of existent traditions but bringing them into dialogue with a continuous stream of ideas and practices from elsewhere (Doostdar, 2018; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Werbner, 1986). Before describing how this attunement to polyontology underpins the methodological approach of this project, I outline the creative forms of theological innovation that young queer Zimbabweans participate in.

Queer Theological Imaginations

As they navigate Zimbabwe's polyontological religious landscape, young queer Zimbabweans forge idiosyncratic spiritual trajectories. I argue that these spiritual journeys ought

[32] I also build on the work of scholars who foreground the distinctively queer affordances of Pentecostalism and other traditions of the Black diaspora, particularly their non-dualistic and spirit-filled characters (Crawley, 2017; Gill, 2018b; Golomski, 2020; Reinhardt, 2015; Yong, 2013).

to be approached as intrinsically theological undertakings that seek to *queer* normative modes of religious engagement and lay out novel theological imaginations. In this vein, I am guided by literature on "ordinary theology" that argues that some of the most lively forms of theological debate and innovation occur among lay congregants, especially those whose voices have historically been marginalized by Christianity (Astley, 2002). I bring this attention to ordinary theological inquiry into dialogue with work in queer studies that has shown how queer people—and queer people of color in particular—respond to marginalization by creatively apprehending existing cultural products and transforming them for their own purposes (Allen, 2011; Halberstam, 2005; Matebeni et al., 2018; Muñoz, 1999; Sedgwick, 2003). But as scholars in Queer of Color Critique have argued, queer studies has often presumed a white, Western, and secular subject and has been deeply ambivalent to forms of religious engagement (M. J. Alexander, 2006; Allen, 2016; Gill, 2018b; Strongman, 2019; Tinsley, 2018; Varghese et al., 2021). By examining queer life through the lens of theological inquiry, I demonstrate that young queer Zimbabweans' spiritual practices simultaneously disrupt and rearticulate hegemonic accounts of queerness, Africanness, and Christian theology.

Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000, 2003) was a founding voice in queer theology, who argued that Christian theology is premised on a highly normative ideology of sexuality. In her view, Christian theological modes of reasoning are imbued with heterosexual logics—for instance, an emphasis on reproductive sexuality, reverence for the couple form, and privileging of normative expressions of gender. As a result, those figures that are viewed as emblematic of sexual indecency in the eyes of Christian theologians—queer people, promiscuous women, those who move beyond the bounds of gendered and sexual norms—are also seen as poor representatives of Christian doctrine. Althaus-Reid turns such perspectives on their head, arguing that "indecent"

subjects throw into relief the sexual norms intrinsic to established theology and ought to be considered some of Christianity's most adept and innovative theologians. I follow Althaus-Reid's provocation by framing those who are typically viewed as falling outside of normative Christian practice in the Zimbabwean context as among its most creative theological innovators. As we shall see, young queer Zimbabweans are deeply interested in biblical texts and seek to articulate theologies that make queer life not only possible but vital.

I pursue Althaus-Reid's analytic approach to queer theology in the context of Zimbabwe's polyontological religious landscape. For this reason, I take an expansive view of theological inquiry and move beyond the bounds of Christianity to consider ancestral practices within the same frame. I argue that such a perspective is necessary in Zimbabwe, where Christians have always had to address the questions raised by competing traditions, particularly those involving ancestors. Indeed, African Christian theologians have long argued for viewing African metaphysics as just as complex, varied, and challenging as Christian theology, even as they have addressed the difficult questions this raises in relation to morality and metaphysics in varied ways (Chitakure, 2017; Chitando, 2000; Mbiti, 1969; Oduyoye, 1992; Olupona, 2014). Christian and ancestral theologies nonetheless sit in awkward relation to one another, not only because they are frequently imagined in antagonistic terms but also because Christianity is a text-based tradition whereas ancestral practices overwhelmingly stem from oral traditions (J. Goody & Watt, 1963; Hofmeyr, 1994). Frequently, this has made it difficult for ancestral practitioners to engage with Christian theological debates on an even footing (Chitando, 2001). I suggest that young queer Zimbabweans trouble this imbalance by drawing on concepts from across the divide and seeking to blur the boundaries between the traditions.

There are three main vectors along which queer Zimbabweans' spiritual quests engage with paradigmatically theological problems. First, they are deeply interested in the nature of the divine, examining not only the qualities of the Christian God but also its relationship to other forms of spiritual potency, particularly ancestral spirits and malevolent spiritual forces like demons. In this vein, they ask: Who and what is God, and can He be worshipped alongside engagements with ancestors? As we shall see, for many the answer to this question ultimately proves to be *yes*. Second, my interlocutors investigate how best to engage with divinity, thinking especially about questions of human mediation. In this sense, they ask: Can I approach God or ancestral spirits directly, and who is best placed to mediate my interactions with Him/them? The answer to this question is often more difficult to discern, and many continue to find the issue of mediation deeply vexing. Finally, young queer Zimbabweans query who ought to represent an authority on the divine and, by extension, who is best placed to generate knowledge about divinity. With this in mind, they ask: Who should I trust to tell me the truth about God and ancestral spirits, and how does this relate to my own capacity to determine insights for myself? This question likewise often proves to be deeply challenging, and as they devise answers to it they frequently discover it reconfigures many of their closest relationships.

In addressing these questions my interlocutors don't necessarily set out to forge "syncretic" traditions of their own, however. Rather, they focus their attention on interrogating distinctive areas of theological concern—like the nature of the divine and questions of mediation—and identify points of convergence between the traditions without striving to integrate the two schemes into a seamless whole. This lack of concern for systematicity reflects another of Althaus-Reid's provocations about the nature of queer theology. She argues that queer theology is fundamentally an embodied practice that exists amid the messiness of human lives, bodies, and

forms of sociality. Indeed, my interlocutors' spiritual quests reflect this emphasis on embodiment in the ways in which God and ancestral spirits make themselves present: through dreams and visions, through sensations of divine presence, and through the felt qualities of intimate kinship. This foregrounding of the body speaks to Ashon Crawley's (2017) argument about the affordances of embodied forms of religiosity at the heart of Black traditions like Pentecostalism. For Crawley, these modes of embodied religious practice contain within them the resources for restructuring existing worlds and imagining alternative futures, themes at the heart of queer imaginative projects (Gill, 2018b; Muñoz, 2009). Though Christian and ancestral spaces may on the surface appear hostile to queer life, their embodied dimensions create gaps and possibilities that hegemonic and normalizing discourses can't fully control. Ultimately, young queer Zimbabweans' theological engagements creatively respond to broader attempts to reimagine queer African subjectivities in the present and demonstrate how ancestral pasts—alongside the Christian histories with which they are intertwined—can become vivid sites of imagination in the contemporary moment.

Fieldsites and Methodology

Finding the Topic

This dissertation is based on sixteen months of fieldwork in Zimbabwe between 2016 and 2020.[33] The project coalesced out of many strands of interest over the course of the past decade, but my initial connection to the Bulawayo was entirely serendipitous. During my first year as an undergraduate I became close friends with an exchange student from Bulawayo who invited me to visit his hometown and stay with his family. On that first visit to Zimbabwe in 2012, I

[33] My long term fieldwork was intended to run from August 2019 to August 2020, but the Covid-19 pandemic halted in-person research in March 2020.

attended many workshops run by a youth development organization and encountered discussions that would lay the groundwork for some of the key themes this dissertation engages. In breaks between meetings, I noticed that queer sexualities were a recurrent topic of conversation among members. I was struck in particular by a discussion between a young woman and her friend about a suspected liaison between two men at their church. She concluded the story with the following line: "I am so homophobic, I really am." She used the term with confidence as a description of her own views, which was such an unfamiliar usage to me that it remained with me.[34] This conversation and several others made me curious to better understand how the Mugabe's nationalist homophobic rhetoric, which I'd read so much about, translated into the everyday sensibilities of ordinary Zimbabweans.

Despite my curiosity, I was deeply aware of the complex politics of the topic, particularly what it might mean for a white foreigner to investigate these kinds of statements. In the first place, it isn't easy to initiate conversations about sexuality with strangers under any circumstances, especially in a social context one is not deeply familiar with. If I was ever to pursue research on sexuality, I knew it would take time to develop both my understanding and relationships with people who would be interested in discussing sensitive subjects with me. More pressingly, my positionality as a white British woman entailed evident dynamics relating to power and trust. Not only did it mean that potential research participants might be cautious about engaging with me, but it also risked reproducing certain stereotypes about queer sexualities in Zimbabwe. I was conscious that I may inadvertently be read as pursuing what some suspect is a broader "agenda" to impose gay rights on African countries (Epprecht, 2008). Indeed, many campaigns advocating the expansion of gay rights in various non-Western countries had

[34] Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I was never able to clarify exactly what she had in mind when she described herself as "homophobic," but it was clear she was not embarrassed to describe herself in this way.

reinscribed prejudices by failing to engage with the political and cultural nuances of specific places, ultimately making the lives of queer subjects even less tenable. Conversely, I was conscious of the risk of reproducing tropes about "homophobic Africa," which were widespread in the West (Coly, 2013).[35]

With these dilemmas in mind, when I returned to Zimbabwe on subsequent visits with an interest in researching gender and sexuality, I repeatedly stepped back from a project on queer life. As a result, my undergraduate thesis examined youth-led development organizations in Bulawayo and my master's thesis investigated young people's use of social media to foster "intimate" public spheres. Nevertheless, with each visit to Bulawayo I became increasingly committed to pursuing long-term research in the city and as time went on unexpectedly found myself led back to the topic from a different perspective.[36] For master's research in 2016, I sought out a fieldsite where I could examine the production and evolution of discourses about sexuality and ancestors, and identified a tabloid newspaper in Bulawayo as a potentially fruitful site. On my first day, I was welcomed into the office with the following words: "You're in the right place—we specialize in sex and goblins." From the first week, I was taken to visit suburbs throughout the city, rural villages across Matabeleland, and became familiar with a wide range of

[35] When I began this research, it was common to encounter articles in Western newspapers with headlines like "Why Africa is the most homophobic continent" (D. Smith, 2014), which sought to explain a purported phenomenon without ever pausing to interrogate its premises (Macharia, 2010).

[36] As I became familiar with the archive of writings on Zimbabwe, I became aware of the marginalization of the Matabeleland region—of which Bulawayo is the capital—in both national politics and academic representations. Despite Zimbabwe's illustrious canon of historical and sociological literature, the Matabeleland region has far less written about it than Shona-speaking regions, which often stand in for Zimbabwe as a whole (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015a; Ranger, 2004; Tendi, 2010). While several scholars have done much to redress this imbalance (J. Alexander et al., 2000; O. N. Moyo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009b), there is a particular paucity of anthropological studies of Matabeleland. This absence goes back to the origin of ethnographic work in Southern Africa; among the Rhodes-Livingston Papers, there is one fairly superficial paper about Ndebele people (Hughes, 1956). Other colonial-era accounts reproduce crude stereotypes about Ndebele people (e.g. L. P. Bowler, 1889; Decle, 1894; N. Jones, 1921; Mandy, 1889). In more recent years, the most notable anthropological studies in Matabeleland are by Richard Werbner (1989, 1991), which focus on Kalanga people. At times this made it difficult to establish historical precedents for aspects of the themes I was studying, hence why I have often had to draw on sources from neighboring contexts when characterizing ancestral spirituality in Matabeleland.

public concerns that had previously been invisible to me, such as exploitative witch-finders known as *tsikamutanda* who were going village to village and extorting money from rural people, or plagues of goblins (*tokoloshe)* that were terrorizing city dwellers. My time at the tabloid enabled me to see Bulawayo and its surrounding rural areas from a wide range of vantage points, and that diversity of perspectives guided my approach to fieldwork and attentiveness to "polyontology" throughout the research of this dissertation.

At the same time, my growing network of friends and acquaintances took me in several key directions. First, several friends introduced me to ancestral spirituality, which is often concealed in middle class life but continues to flourish behind closed doors, particularly in Bulawayo's high-density suburbs. Ancestral practitioners welcomed me into their homes, keen to have their knowledge recorded; indeed, many expressed fears about the decline and disappearance of ancestral traditions in Zimbabwe and were enthusiastic about having their experiences documented. Second, friends put me in touch with the Bulawayo leadership of GALZ, the country's foremost gay rights organization that had been the subject of Mugabe's outrage in 1995.[37] To my surprise, GALZ wasn't an underground organization but a public presence in the city. Newspapers frequently wrote articles about it; there was a large rainbow flag outside its headquarters, next to the national flag; and its leadership was keen for greater exposure. When I contacted the director of the Bulawayo branch and began to get to know its members, people at GALZ were incredibly enthusiastic about the prospect of participating in a research study. They were particularly supportive of a project that focused on the intersection between queer and religious life, which many noted was both frequently denied in public debates in Zimbabwe and neglected in academic literature. During preliminary research I first noticed the

[37] I use the real name for GALZ because there is a robust existing literature on the organization, and they gave me research access for this project on the grounds that I would contribute to this scholarship.

striking revival of ancestral spiritualities among queer Zimbabweans and, with recent injunctions about exploring alternative queer African archives in mind (Macharia, 2015; Migraine-George & Currier, 2016), the topic became my central focus.

Fieldsites and Methods

This project was designed as an examination of the religious and spiritual lives of members of GALZ. While GALZ was a key site for recruiting research participants and learning about sexual rights activism, however, I didn't seek to undertake an ethnography of the organization itself, sexual rights activism in general, or any one religious denomination in particular. While there have been many nuanced works on institutional and congregational life in Africa in recent decades, I was committed to capturing spiritual life beyond institutional confines and reflecting the messiness of individual trajectories across a varied and complex polyontological religious landscape.[38] Moreover, while sexual rights organizations were a site that made it possible for me to meet a wide range of queer people, my aim was not to produce an account of queer life that was primarily oriented towards activism or the internal dynamics of rights-based advocacy.[39] While advocacy initiatives animated many of my interlocutors' lives, even the most deeply committed activists were grappling with familial and spiritual questions that occurred largely apart from and far exceeded the organization (Friedner, 2019). Moreover, many interlocutors

[38] Such studies span the work of NGOs (Bornstein, 2003; Ferguson, 1990), the course of activist campaigns (Englund, 2006; Lorway, 2014), and the dynamics of Christian congregations (Daswani, 2015; Haynes, 2017).[38] These studies have shown how people become recruited by organizations, and how they simultaneously reproduce and move beyond the logics of those institutions.

[39] Indeed, there have already been strong studies of these themes, notably Marc Epprecht's *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance* (Epprecht, 2013); Robert Lorway's Namibia's Rainbow Project: Gay Rights in an African Nation (Lorway, 2014); Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro, and Vasu Reddy's *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism* (2018); Adriaan van Klinken's *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (2019); and Seth Palmer's "Divine Monarchy, Spirited Sovereignties, and the Timely Malagasy MSM Medium-Activist Subject" (2021).

described feeling marginal within these organizations, and I wanted to capture the experiences of those who were not necessarily most at home in institutional settings. As such, I used an organization—GALZ—as a site from which to recruit research participants and set out to study their religious lives beyond it.

As I developed familiarity with the landscape of sexual rights activism in Bulawayo, I came to work not only with GALZ but also with two of GALZ's affiliate organizations in the city (which I have chosen to anonymize) that support queer women and transgender people, respectively. All of these organizations have their own premises in Bulawayo's low-density neighborhoods, which function as spaces to hold workshops and for people to socialize, yet they have quite different foci and interests. GALZ is the oldest and highest profile of the three organizations, having been founded in Harare in the late 1980s. It has dual emphases on public health and campaigns aimed at shifting attitudes to same-sex intimacies in Zimbabwe. It opened regional headquarters in Bulawayo in 2010 and has around 500 registered members in the city. In

Figure 1. Flags at the GALZ premises in Bulawayo. Photo by author.

contrast, the second organization was borne out of frustrations regarding the emphasis on the needs of gay men within GALZ and is an explicitly feminist organization, founded in 2013. It focuses particularly on issues like violence towards queer women and trans people, having around one hundred members. Finally, the third organization was founded to advance trans rights in Bulawayo in 2015 and seeks to redress the historic neglect of the needs of trans people in queer activism in Zimbabwe. Because it was only established recently and caters to an even smaller population, it has fewer than 50 members.

While these organizations are oriented towards distinctive populations, they address similar demographics in terms of age and socio-economic class. Notably, the memberships of all three organizations are skewed towards people under 40; indeed, they essentially have no members above the age of 50. This is because many queer Zimbabweans over 50 have spent most of their adult lives apart from institutional or activist spaces and rarely seek them out. Moreover, they have developed ways of life based on conducting their intimate and romantic lives in private, and the notion of sexual identity being a public or social matter is not part of their lived experience. Reflecting this, most of my interlocutors were aged 20-35, and I frequently refer to "young queer Zimbabweans" to reflect the age specificity of my interlocutors. It is more difficult to generalize about the socio-economic class of the memberships of these organizations, but as with other actors in the NGO economy the majority of the organizations' beneficiaries tend to be less wealthy people because they are more attracted to the forms of material support they offer, like travel expenses, free meals after workshops, and occasional monetary payments for attending workshops (Biruk, 2020). That said, it is extremely difficult for anyone to maintain a steady income in Zimbabwe's economy, which has very low rates of formal employment and high levels of inflation, meaning that many people in Bulawayo have highly variable incomes and it

can be difficult to neatly ascribe class status (Takabvirwa, Forthcoming). At the same time, a key function of these organizations is offering their members "safe spaces," a benefit that is most appealing—and, indeed, necessary—for less wealthy people, who often don't have access to private spaces at home to socialize with friends or partners due to crowded domestic circumstances. Of course, class is not only a matter of economics and many interlocutors were highly educated regardless of their financial situations. In particular, many of the people who became central to my research had university educations, even though almost all lived at home with parents or siblings and had limited incomes. It was difficult to avoid this bias towards more educated people, as they were frequently the most interested in speaking and theorizing about their experiences with me. The benefit of this was being able to share excerpts of the dissertation with them as I wrote, and to think through many of its core questions collaboratively.

Figure 2. Murals on the inside walls of the compound of a sexual rights organization in Bulawayo. Photo by author.

While I did not undertake an ethnography of institutional life *per se*, I did conduct participant observation at all three organizations by attending key events and workshops. Workshops are the context in which many young queer people encounter identity- and rights-based frameworks for thinking about gender and sexuality, which provided me with important context for identifying where interlocutors had first encountered key ideas and concepts that circulate in global gay rights activism (Gal, 2003). Indeed, interlocutors frequently invoked phrases like "safe space" and "SOGIE" (an acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression) in our conversations, which were part of the institutional and activist discourses of these organizations. In this vein, I attended workshops on topics including identity-based frameworks, safe sex demonstrations, the legal underpinning of gay rights activism in Zimbabwe, and efforts to change media coverage in the country. These events were always conducted in English with occasional short discussions in Ndebele. In contrast to criticisms of identity-based activism detailed above, many of my interlocutors viewed the categories of the global gay rights movement not as an external imposition but as a vocabulary that articulated aspects of their sense of self in non-pathologizing terms (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015). Indeed, before encountering sexual identity terms, many of my interlocutors were only familiar with terms with Shona and Ndebele language terms for queerness, which are generally considered slurs. While at first this seemed to be at odds with their engagements with ancestral spirituality, over time I came to realize that the two epistemological schemes informed one another and their wider explorations of sexual subjectivity (Friedner, 2020).

Beyond participant observation, one of my key methodological tools was life history interviews (Crapanzano, 1977; Zeitlyn, 2008). I recruited interviewees by meeting people at social functions at sexual rights organizations, and by sending information to their group

messaging forums (which have hundreds of members) describing my interest in learning about queer religious practices. This enabled people who wanted to discuss their intimate and religious lives to opt in to my research, and I was contacted by far more people than I was able to interview before the pandemic halted my fieldwork. I conducted over fifty life history interviews, asking interlocutors about their families, religious upbringings, experiences with gender and sexuality growing up, how they encountered sexual rights organizations, and their spiritual explorations in adulthood. These interviews were conducted in both Ndebele and English, but given the high levels of English fluency among people in Bulawayo many of my interviewees were more comfortable speaking with me in English. In the first few months of fieldwork I conducted interviews wherever I could—in my car, an empty room at a sexual rights organization, or even in a quiet spot under the shade of a tree in a park. After several months a friend offered to let me borrow a small office in an anonymous building in the center of Bulawayo, which provided an ideal location for interviews. It was a neutral space, not associated with any one sexual rights organization or religious denomination, and enabled participants to speak without apprehensions about being overhead. This is the space in which Lindiwe and Zandile spoke to me about their experiences in the vignette that opens the dissertation. These interviews regularly exceeded three hours in length, and at the end participants often expressed that they found the conversation therapeutic, especially in lieu of other outlets in which to discuss their experiences. Moreover, life history interviews also enabled me to build deep relationships with participants, as I rapidly learned about many of their most formative experiences. While I identify one of the organizations I worked with, all individual names are pseudonyms and I have been careful to disguise people's identities.

In-depth life history interviews enabled me to build many deep and lasting friendships with research participants, and it was through interviews that I first got to know the individuals that became my key interlocutors, who numbered around fifteen. In general, I began to get to know interlocutors through interviews and subsequently asked to visit their sites of religious practice. This led me into a wide variety of congregational and ritual spaces, including Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Adventist churches; Pentecostal churches ranging from informal backyard congregations to glitzy megachurches in the city center; and a range of sites of ancestral spirituality. At each of these locations, I conducted participant observation as a member of the congregation and documented how my research participants engaged with the ideas and texts circulating in these spaces. Moreover, I conducted life history interviews with eleven established *sangomas* in Bulawayo and rural parts of Matabeleland, who ranged in age from 22- to 89-years-old, and attended a number of ritual events (including cleansing and rainmaking ceremonies), which gave me a variety of perspectives on the formal practice of ancestral spirituality.[40] My interviews with *sangomas* began during preliminary fieldwork and enabled me to gain a working knowledge of ancestral spirituality, becoming familiar with its cosmological principles and specialist vocabularies. My familiarity with this information enabled me to quickly build rapport with subsequent interlocutors, who were often surprised I knew about niche concepts that many young Zimbabweans are unfamiliar with.

Many of my core interlocutors were in the midst of exploring ancestral spirituality themselves, although a number were ambivalent or skeptical about it. Among those who were actively pursuing it, most were nervous about how discussions of ancestral spirituality might be

[40] I describe formal training procedures in greater depth in subsequent chapters, but those I refer to as *sangomas* have been trained by an established *sangoma* (a pedagogical role known as a *gobela*) and initiated (*ukuthwasa*), and are registered with the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA).

perceived by family and friends, and did not always have many people to speak about it with. While I was sensitive to the fact that these explorations were deeply personal and often tentative, many allowed me to follow and document their "spiritual journeys" as they unfolded.[41] Even after my in-person fieldwork was interrupted by the pandemic, I continued to speak to many interlocutors via WhatsApp and Zoom, and was able to capture how their spiritual journeys evolved over the course of years. In this sense, because the topic itself was of deep interest to many of the people whose voices saturate this dissertation, much of the theorizing was done in collaboration with my interlocutors.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is comprised of four substantive chapters. After the first chapter, which investigates struggles over ancestors over the course of Zimbabwe's history, the remaining three chapters trace the religious lives of the young queer people at the heart of this dissertation. These chapters form an arc mirroring the "spiritual journeys" that many of my interlocutors undertake across Zimbabwe's religious landscape, from the mainline Christian congregations of their childhood, to encountering Pentecostal churches as young adults, and finally to exploring ancestral spirituality in adulthood. While this trajectory is representative of a relatively small group of young queer people in Bulawayo, I suggest that it represents a significant attempt to think both with and beyond identity-based models of sexual selfhood and to turn to spiritual practices in a bid to articulate distinctively African queer theologies.

[41] The phrase "spiritual journey" was regularly invoked by my interlocutors to describe their explorations beyond formal Christian worship. I was never able to establish exactly where people had first encountered the phrase, but it is commonly used by popular South African *sangomas* with an online presence, who use it to describe seeking to cultivate a relationship with ancestors.

In Chapter 1, I examine the history of struggles over ancestors in Zimbabwe over the course of the last three centuries. I show that while the legacy of Christianity and colonialism have dramatically reconfigured the metaphysical context in which ancestral spirits exist, people have continuously struggled to apprehend ancestors' volatile spiritual power. I argue that ancestors have recurrently been the substance through which struggles over power, authority, and belonging are negotiated. Because of the contested nature of ancestral spirituality, I resist providing a single or authoritative account of ancestral spirits and instead highlight the currents of debate that feed into the plural realities of ancestral spirituality in the present. Moreover, I suggest that while Pentecostal Christianity appears to have played a significant role in undermining ancestral traditions, it has in fact reinvigorated interest in ancestors. Finally, I demonstrate that ancestors have been a perennial site for challenging social and political marginalization, especially during periods of rapid social change. As such, I contend, queer Zimbabweans turn to ancestral spirituality to navigate the fraught process of the emergence of new categories of gender and sexual identity.

In Chapter 2, I explore the experience of queer Christians and consider why many turn to Pentecostal congregations in early adulthood. I describe the frustrations young people feel about mainline churches and suggest that the distinctive appeal of Pentecostalism lies in its promise of a more unmediated form of Christianity. Once in these spaces, I show that young people encounter the evangelical idea of a personal relationship with God, which enables them to cultivate a capacity to discern the right spiritual path for themselves. In contrast to literature on Christianity in Africa that presents Pentecostal conversion as the embracing of a new identity and a move away from the old ways, I show that for many of my interlocutors encountering Pentecostalism is often the beginning of a more wide-ranging search for spiritual fulfilment that

takes people in many directions. Ultimately, the forms of homophobia that young queer people often encounter in Pentecostal churches pushes many away from these congregations, yet they are shaped by the perspectives they encounter in these spaces. The idea of having a personal relationship with God enables young people keen to challenge their parents' and pastors' authority, which ultimately lays the groundwork for a revival of ancestral spiritual practices.

In Chapter 3, I investigate how young queer people come to change their minds about ancestral spirituality, and how these shifts entail negotiations over spiritual authority within family networks. Throughout the chapter, I explore the complex intergenerational dynamics surrounding ancestral spirituality and sexuality within young queer people's kinship networks, which give rise to webs of secrecy and suspicion. I examine intergenerational struggles over ancestral practices within tight knit family settings, showing how ideas about authority, seniority, and eldership structure and complicate Zimbabwean family dynamics. Then, I show the varied trajectories young queer people take as they break away from their parents' and churches' admonitions about ancestral spirituality and consult with *sangomas* on their own. I argue that they build on their sense of having a personal relationship with God to seek out *sangomas* who might answer unresolved questions they have about their families and develop richer understandings of themselves. Finally, I show how young queer people begin to decouple ancestral spirituality from the authority of elders, increasingly turning to one another as they recast themselves as voices of spiritual authority, laying the groundwork for a broader reinvention of ancestral spirituality.

In Chapter 4, I examine how young queer Zimbabweans transform ancestral spirituality into a space in which to heal themselves by forging new types of kinship relations with ancestral spirits. I begin by detailing young queer people's first encounters with ancestral spirituality,

which often occur in the consulting rooms of *sangomas* as their parents seek "healing" for their queerness. This reflects one of several competing "traditional" perspectives on queerness in contemporary Zimbabwe, which young queer people reject. While they don't perceive a connection between queerness and ancestral spirits, they do find aspects of ancestral spirituality appealing. By embracing the categories of the global gay rights movement, which posit that gender and sexual identity are fixed and unchangeable, they are able to refuse efforts to alter queerness. Moreover, as they foster relationships with *amadlozi,* they find ancestral spirits offer intimacy, care, protection, and guidance, and simultaneously recognize and embrace their gender and sexual identities. Overall, I argue, relationships with spirits enable young queer Zimbabweans to reframe understandings of healing and queerness within ancestral epistemologies, and to forge the forms of kinship and intimacy they often feel denied by living kin.

Chapter 1

Ancestors, Authority, and Power in Zimbabwe

"We were meant to lose our identity," Miriro told me. "When the missionaries came, it wasn't only about introducing Christianity. It was also about us forgetting the traditional and cultural aspects of our way of life. We weren't meant to connect with our spiritual, bloodline-filled identity," she said. As Miriro described the effects of colonialism on Zimbabwe's indigenous traditions, her narrative was haunted by the presence and absence of the figures at the heart of precolonial cosmologies: ancestors. In Zimbabwe, after someone dies they continue to exist in the world of spirits. Certain spirits known as *amadlozi* have special gifts, like healing and prophesy, and continue to be important in the lives of their descendants for generations—even centuries—to come. Members of their lineage consult with them via their chosen mediums, *sangomas*, who transmit ancestral insights to assist with the health and prosperity of the living. However, as Miriro indicated, following the advent of British colonialism in the late nineteenth century, colonial officials and missionaries viewed ancestral practices as forms of pagan superstition that were both morally and politically dangerous, initiating a process of doubt, demonization, and erasure that would gradually undermine their metaphysical foothold. While churches of various denominations have always preached against ancestral traditions, forms of Pentecostal Christianity that became hugely popular in the late twentieth century targeted them with renewed fervor. As a result, Miriro and other interlocutors in their twenties and thirties acquire knowledge of ancestors in fragments, if at all.

Before I met Miriro, ancestors were almost invisible to me. When I spoke to a range of people about their religious lives—including at various preliminary fieldsites: a youth development organization, a tabloid newspaper, and at home with my Seventh Day Adventist host family—I noticed that ancestral practices were always spoken about at a remove, temporally and spatially. Ancestral spirituality was practiced by people in the past and those in the rural areas, friends and colleagues indicated. It was particularly distant from the forms of middle class urban life that most people I knew at the time aspired to. When my Adventist host mother spoke about her own ancestors, it was to tell me she was sad to realize they were heathens and wouldn't go to heaven. When I asked a colleague working in development about ancestors, he responded, "Yes, unfortunately some people in the rural areas still believe in ancestors—they go to witch doctors when they're sick and brew beer for the ancestors. They don't understand; they're not real Christians."[1] I was struck by the recurrence of narratives that framed ancestral practices as a way of life increasingly confined to Zimbabwe's margins, places like the remote border regions of Binga and Chipinge that are associated with an excess of "tradition." Given what I saw around me, however, I largely took these narratives about the decline of ancestral spirituality at face value. They reflected the committed Christian practice of the people I knew: churches of every denomination throughout the city filled to capacity on Sundays, and casual dismissals of the legitimacy of ancestral practices in everyday conversations.[2]

[1] The phrase "witch doctor" is a common English language translation for the Ndebele words *sangoma* and *inyanga* (see fn. 2 in the Introduction), though it has pathologizing connotations. The preferred translation among *sangomas* themselves is "traditional healer," though as I explain further in Chapter 4 both emphasize an equivalence with Western biomedicine, when in fact the scope of "healing" in ancestral cosmologies is far more expansive.

[2] Notably, recent academic literature on Southern Africa often reflects this telling of events. Where ancestors do appear, they are generally characterized as the "other" to institutions that are the drivers of contemporary life: development, medicine, and Pentecostal Christianity (A. H. Anderson, 2019; Bornstein, 2003; Decoteau, 2013). Notably, they are rarely the primary object of study.

While these narratives appear to tell a linear story about the decline and disappearance of ancestors, however, they also point to ancestors' continued purchase. Ancestors often manifested in the negative as the "other" to modern and Christian ways of life, but in the process remain the object of considerable interest and concern. Indeed, I began to notice that ancestors saturated the fabric of urban life in surprising and sometimes contradictory ways. National television played songs from the liberation struggle that exalted the role of ancestors in securing Zimbabwe's independence;[3] pastors undertook all-night prayer meetings to "deliver" congregants from the grip of ancestral spirits; friends occasionally admitted to consulting with *sangomas* when a particularly pressing problem arose that required their expertise; and others spoke with apprehension about ancestral curses passed down through bloodlines. Even those discourses that appeared to straightforwardly demonize ancestors played a role in reinscribing their social significance. "In our culture, what your forefathers did is very important," my friend Tanaka, a committed Pentecostal, told me. Tanaka was vocally critical of those who engaged in ancestral practices, yet ancestors were a topic of daily intrigue to her. As she struggled with difficulties in her marriage, career, and children's lives, she wondered if her various stresses might have an ancestral origin of some kind, a type of curse passed down across generations. Over time, she cultivated her own personal epistemology of ancestors, compiled from an eclectic variety of sources: her parents' admonitions, social media, pastors' sermons, soap operas, friends' experiences, biblical texts, and Hollywood movies. Like many Christians, Tanaka was skeptical about the ethics of soliciting help from ancestors. Nonetheless, she was aware of their potency and continuing sway over people's lives.

[3] For more on the continued salience of songs from the liberation struggle (known as Chimurenga music), see Ezra Chitando and Joram Tarusarira (2017).

At the same time, other friends revealed that while ancestral spirituality may appear to be fading from urban life, it continued to have a surprisingly lively contemporary existence. Miriro took me to meet with *sangomas* and other traditional experts across Bulawayo, sharing the intricate knowledge she was developing of her own ancestral spirits. It was in her company that I first witnessed a *sangoma* undergo spirit possession, an occasion on which ancestral spirits speak through the body of their medium and provide counsel to those who consult with them. She showed me that one passes the homes of *sangomas* every few blocks in the city, and behind closed doors are rooms filled with hundreds of jars of medicinal herbs stacked from floor to ceiling, cloths shrouding the wide range of tools used in ancestral divination. Moreover, often under the cover of night, *sangomas* told me they received a steady stream of people coming to consult about all kinds of issues, from health problems to family dramas to suspected curses—and, many *sangomas* claimed in hushed voices, their clients include prominent political and religious figures. Miriro taught me to identify the imprint of ancestors on the fabric of urban life: visible in the subtle carvings on traditional walking sticks (*induku*), a particular set of beads and bangles around someone's neck, the cloth sold in the market, and even in small groups of people huddled around a stack of balancing rocks beside the road. While Christian narratives that spoke of ancestors in demonic terms appeared to have a totalizing hold, they disguised a much more complex reality in which ancestral spirituality endures on the margins of society—and, periodically, loudly reasserts itself at the center.

Today, ancestors exist at the interstices of multiple discourses that seek to apprehend them, yet they continuously evade total capture. In this chapter, I show that although colonialism and evolving dynamics of Christianization have dramatically—and often violently—reconfigured the metaphysical context in which ancestral spirits exist, ancestors have long been the substance

through which struggles over power, authority, and belonging are negotiated (Lambek, 1998, 2016). Ancestral spirits are particularly susceptible to such struggles because they promise access to power and riches, yet they also signify an unstable form of charismatic spiritual power that operates along the frequently blurry boundary between good and evil (Lewis, 1971; Mbiti, 1969). They connect people to particular places and lineages, making possible social and political belonging, while calling into question the legitimacy of others (Garbett, 1963; Lan, 1985). Furthermore, their simultaneous time-boundedness (as historical figures) and timelessness (as social actors with the capacity to speak across time) enables them to be redeployed to speak to changing historical circumstances (Cole & Middleton, 2001; Lambek, 1998). As such, even apparently simple assertions about ancestors in the present index highly dynamic struggles over power, authority, and belonging that stretch back centuries (Cole, 2001). Such conflicts are often indicative of points of strain in Zimbabwean society, revealing simmering tensions along the lines of gender, generation, and political allegiance.

In this chapter, I outline the metaphysical underpinnings and cosmological worldview in which ancestors are situated, and their history over the course of several centuries in Zimbabwe. Rather than seeking to uncover a singular "reality" of ancestral spirituality, however, I highlight the currents of debate and struggle that feed into the plural realities of ancestral spirituality in the polyontological landscape of the present (McIntosh, 2019; Palmié, 2013). As I detail the fate of ancestors across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras, I provide an overview of the history of Zimbabwe and the city of Bulawayo in particular. In the first part of the chapter, I examine ancestors in the precolonial period and describe their central part in the negotiation of social change and incorporation of outsiders, particularly in light of upheavals caused by migration and conquest. Next, I consider ancestors in the era of colonization, exploring the

pivotal role they played in the first anti-colonial struggle of the 1890s and the increasing censure to which they were subject by missionaries and administrators with the onset of settler colonialism. Then, I detail the history of ancestors in the colonial era, during which land alienation and Christianization figured centrally in the project of reforming African metaphysics and created enduring grievances that culminated in the liberation movement of the 1970s. Finally, I discuss ancestors in the postcolonial era, showing how they became central to Robert Mugabe's articulation of state power but increasingly lost purchase in light of the explosion of Pentecostal Christianity and the disillusionments with postcolonial politics. Overall, I argue that because ancestors promise the potent but volatile authority of those who can claim a connection to the past and the otherworldly, they have repeatedly found themselves at the heart of social struggles in times of change. While they appear to have lost relevance among young urban Zimbabweans, in subsequent chapters I demonstrate that they remain a compelling site of possibility for articulating new theologies and crafting livable lives.

Approaching the Precolonial

Southern Africa has never been culturally homogeneous nor isolated from the outside world, as colonial myths often implied. As we saw in the introduction, understanding life in precolonial Southern Africa from the vantage point of the present is a vexed undertaking. The region was comprised of societies without written records that were subject to the violent rupture of settler colonialism in the nineteenth century. The precolonial remains an important touchstone, however, and the ancestral cosmologies this dissertation examines have rhizomatic roots in the centuries before European colonization. In this section, I detail the ontological and metaphysical scheme in which ancestral spirits were embedded, and how they figured in precolonial struggles

Figure 3. Map of contemporary Zimbabwe, with Bulawayo marked in red. Source: Charumbira, R. 2015. *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, p. xxx.

over power, authority, and belonging in ways that continue to shape Zimbabwean political and social life.

Precolonial African societies shared key metaphysical and ontological commonalities. When trying to outline the contours of these similarities, it is easy to fall into essentialist tropes and generalizing glosses; indeed, collapsing manifold cultural and historical differences into a singular narrative about "Africa" was a central aspect of European colonial projects (Mudimbe, 1994). Yet the continued purchase of Africa as an organizing concept and marker of identity suggests its foundation is deeper than colonial ideologies alone, and the notion of a shared metaphysical order is an important vector of commonality. As we have seen, this metaphysical order was vitalist. Ancestors and ancestral spirits—alongside their living mediums—played a particularly significant role in the metaphysics of people as far apart as Senegal in the west, Congo in the center, Sudan in the northeast, Zambia in the south, and even the islands of Madagascar and the Comoros archipelago off the eastern coast.[4] While in many African cosmological schemes there exists a creator God, ancestors mediated between the world of the living and that of spirits (Nyathi, 2015).[5] Ancestors were central to sustaining life and enabling their descendants to flourish, bestowing goods like fertility, prosperity, and longevity. As Jacob Olupona succinctly puts it, "African traditional religions typically strive for this-worldly salvation—measured in terms of health, wealth, and offspring—while at the same time maintaining close contact with the otherworldly realm of ancestors, spirits, and gods" (2014, p. 3).

[4] Hundreds of texts reflect these commonalities, but see notable works such as J. Lorand Matory on Yoruba culture in Nigeria (2005), Paul Stoller on Hauka spirits in Niger (1995), Janice Boddy on the Zār cult of Sudan (1989), Victor Turner on Ndembu ritual in Zambia (1968), and Michael Lambek on spirits in the Comoros (1981).

[5] Ancestors are presented as central to spiritual life in Africa by both African theologians (Daneel, 1970; Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1969; Olupona, 2000) and Euro-American socio-cultural anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard, 1956; R. Horton, 1967; Lienhardt, 1961; Turner, 1968), despite divergences in the approaches of the two disciplines.

In Southern Africa, ancestors were not only metaphysically central but also played a pivotal role during periods of intense social and political upheaval. This was particularly explicit during the emergence of the Ndebele nation and its conquest of present-day southwestern Zimbabwe in the nineteenth century, the site of this study, and had far-reaching consequences for the region's future. Before the Ndebele conquest, the kingdoms of present-day Zimbabwe were connected to expansive trade networks, particularly the Monomotapa Kingdom that constructed the monumental gold-trading city of Great Zimbabwe (see Fig. 4).[6] These polities collected tribute from across the wide area between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers—which today mark the country's northern, eastern, and southern borders—forging political, linguistic, and cultural

Figure 4. The Great Enclosure at Great Zimbabwe today. Photo by author.

[6] Great Zimbabwe was constructed and occupied between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. Archeological finds at Great Zimbabwe reveal that these trading networks extended east to the shores of the Indian Ocean, north to the Swahili coast, and eastwards as far as the Middle East and South Asia (Ndoro, 2005).

ties across the region (Beach, 1980). European colonizers would later subsume many of these groups under the umbrella of "Shona" ethnic identity, a word that masked a broad array of local dialects and political allegiances that sat in complex relation to one another (Ranger, 1985b).[7] There were other peoples besides Shona-speaking groups across the territory, including Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Kalanga, and Tonga speaking peoples. Prior to the nineteenth century, then, the region was occupied by a diverse array of socio-political groups that had complex networks and relations of dependence with one another (Worby, 1994).

Ancestors figured centrally in the spiritual and political lives of all of these societies, playing a significant role in structuring power relations and fostering integration among people who came to live close to one another. For centuries, ancestral spirits had been crucial to the creation and consolidation of durable political allegiances in the region (Garbett, 1992). The authority of chiefs, the most widespread office of political power in the precolonial era, was premised on their connections to powerful ancestors. Many chiefs could recall genealogies that stretched back centuries, legitimizing their claim to rule while simultaneously buttressing patriarchal and gerontocratic authority (Vail & White, 1991). Chiefs were able to expand their influence and legitimate their authority over subject communities by making them acknowledge and pay heed to their own ancestors (Schoeman, 2020). In a region susceptible to drought, moreover, chiefs' ancestral spirits were responsible for ensuring rainfall, meaning they were vital to economic stability and social reproduction. At the same time, ancestors' voice among the living—spirit mediums—also represented a distinctive form of social power. As anthropologist

[7] Zimbabwe's majority ethno-linguistic group today is Shona people, a moniker with a complex history; a colonial invention that encompassed a wide range of dialects and peoples who didn't necessarily imagine themselves to be related (Ranger, 1985b), grouping together clans like the Korekore, Zezuru, and Manyika that had historically often in conflict with one another. Nonetheless, the idea of Shona-ness came to be important in Zimbabwe, and since the early colonial era was pitted against with the other major ethno-linguistic group in Zimbabwe, the Ndebele.

Kingsley Garbett has argued, mediums' ability to speak on behalf of long-dead spirits meant they occupied a unique social role, "translated to a level 'outside' the contemporary social system and […] called upon to act as unbiased intermediaries" (1969, p. 107). Alongside chiefs, then, spirit mediums had a latent capacity to draw people together and coordinate disparate groups across vast stretches of land.

While the region was never static or homogenous, the arrival of ever greater numbers of European settlers in coastal areas of Southern Africa had consequences that would radically reshape the territories of contemporary Zimbabwe decades before the imposition of formal settler colonialism. Dutch colonizers first settled in the region of the Cape peninsula in 1652 and over the ensuing centuries tens of thousands of Europeans colonized the coastlines, forming the Afrikaans-speaking Boer population (Omer-Cooper, 1994). The British took over the Cape Colony from the Dutch in the early nineteenth century, which led the majority of Boer population—then numbering around 25,000—to set out on "treks" eastwards in a bid to escape the reaches of British administration and the imposition of common law. The lands they came to occupy were of course already home to a multitude of Black communities, who they often came into conflict with and violently displaced (Esterhuysen, 2015). The treks of the Boers were ultimately a catalyst for numerous local battles, power struggles, and forced migrations over the course of the first few decades of the nineteenth century, giving rise to a period of widespread upheaval across Southern Africa known as the *Mfecane*—a word that conveys crushing, scattering, and forced dispersal (Hamilton, 1995). These upheavals were central to the rise of the legendary Zulu king Shaka, and in the 1820s a soldier from the senior ranks of Shaka's army—Mzilikazi—broke away from the Zulu Kingdom with a band of five hundred warriors (Omer-Cooper, 1966). Under Mzilikazi's leadership, this group moved north and wove its way through

the contemporary regions of KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo, raiding and incorporating people from varied ethnolinguistic groups and swelling its ranks (Cobbing, 1974). Eventually, around 1838, they crossed the Limpopo River into present-day southwestern Zimbabwe, conquering large swathes of territory and forcibly incorporating tens of thousands of Shona, Sotho, Tonga, and other people.

Mzilikazi's relatively small fighting force eventually came to occupy a third of the territory of present-day Zimbabwe, laying the groundwork for the emergence of a new "Ndebele" social and political identity. Because Ndebele society was comprised of many linguistic groups that were conquered in a relatively short period of time, the leaders of the new nation had to work hard to foster a sense of shared political identity. Ancestors and ancestral spirits were a crucial means of fostering political legitimacy and the consent of the governed (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009b). Mzilikazi came from a society that held ancestors to be cosmologically central—especially powerful ancestral spirits known as *amadlozi*—with a system of healing centered around *sangomas*. At the same time, the Shona, Tonga, Venda, Sotho and other peoples

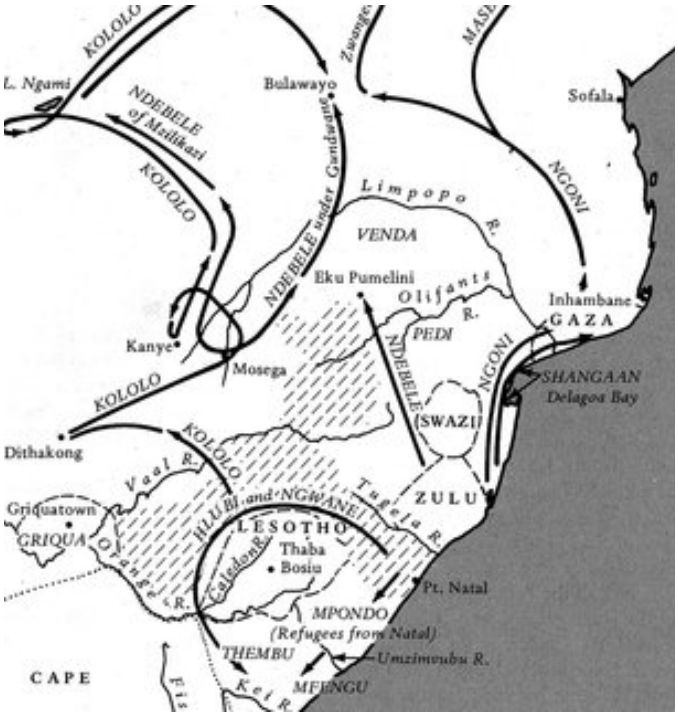

Figure 5. Map of the Mfecane migrations, c. 1810-30. Source:

inhabiting the lands they conquered each had their own epistemologies, which invariably involved ancestral spirits tied to local territories, many of which Mzilikazi either incorporated or allowed to coexist in a heterogeneous religious landscape (J. Alexander et al., 2000).[8] Mzilikazi's base was located near the Matopos Hills, a region of dramatic mountains and balancing rocks that had been a spiritually significant place for thousands of years, and the incorporation of local religious figures became central to his consolidation of power and authority.[9] For instance, Mzilikazi affiliated himself with local spirit mediums who knew how to appease the spirits of the land (Ranger, 1999); Mwari—the "god of the Matopos Hills" (Daneel, 1970)—was incorporated into a Ndebele worldview as Mlimo; and Shona idioms about family spirits (*vadzimu*) and powerful ancestral spirits (*mhondoro*) became part of Ndebele cosmology (Bhebe, 1979b). Conversely, Mzilikazi's own ancestral spirits were framed as national ancestors, a move that encouraged all members of the Ndebele state to accept the power and authority of the new royal lineage. Mzilikazi's intermixing of his own ancestral traditions with those of the region he had conquered underlines the important ideological aspects of ancestral spirits, illustrating the role they played in asserting political legitimacy and cultivating commonality.

In light of ancestors' role in buttressing the power of kings and chiefs like Mzilikazi, scholarly and popular work on ancestors in the precolonial era has often implicitly tied them to masculinist idioms of power. Many historians of Zimbabwe postulate that most or all mediums and the spirits they channeled were male, and that ancestors served to reproduce systems of

[8] Scholars of religion have argued that there were in fact two distinct traditions of ancestral practice in Zimbabwe that became intertwined in the nineteenth century following the Ndebele conquest (Beach, 1980; Cobbing, 1977; Daneel, 1970; Garbett, 1992). On the one hand, there was a system of spirit mediums or *sangomas/svikiro*, who had influence over relatively small local areas. On the other hand, there was the more hierarchical and wide-reaching "Mwari cult" with its focal point at the Njelele shrine in the Matopos.

[9] The most significant religious site in the Matopos was the shrine at Njelele, which historically was the most important religious center anywhere on the Zimbabwean plateau and continues to be active today (Makuvaza, 2008).

patriarchal rule, patrilineal descent, and heterosexual reproduction. In the words of Kingsley Garbett, "Except for those, mostly women, who act as mediums for malevolent ancestral spirits (*ngozi*) […] spirit mediumship is confined to a few men and a very few women" (1969, p. 106).[10] In a similar vein, Jean Comaroff argued that among Tswana people in neighboring Botswana, "Ancestors formed part of the sphere in which men… reproduced the social order in its established form" (1985, p. 83). Yet these assertions obscure the fact that spirit mediumship has long been an important site for the expression of feminized and queer ways of being in the world—that is, those lifeways that transgress established gendered and intimate norms. As we saw in the introduction, African feminists have argued that women's roles were not as marginal or fixed in precolonial Africa as often assumed, and that affiliation with ancestral spirits enabled women to assert and leverage political power (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Underlining the significance of non-masculinist idioms of ancestral power is the reality that perhaps the most important ancestor in Zimbabwe's history—Nehanda—and her medium, Charwe, were both female, who would play a central role in the aftermath of the arrival of white settlers in the late nineteenth century.

Colonial Metaphysics

The colonization of Southern Africa involved a clash not just between peoples, but between two metaphysical orientations to the world. These orientations radically structured ideas about human relations to the unseen—the world of spirits and the supernatural—as well as with one another. European colonial powers undoubtedly had access to military might they could use to forcibly crush resistance and push people off their land. But historians of Southern Africa have

[10] Garbett was one of the first European anthropologists to undertake a thorough study of Shona cosmologies, and his work has been very influential in the anthropology of Zimbabwe.

long emphasized the two-sidedness of the colonial encounter and African agency in responding to the demands of colonialism (J. Alexander, 2006; Charumbira, 2015; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Hunt, 1999; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009b; Ranger, 1967). While European missionaries and colonial officials sought to control the African reception of Christian doctrines and eradicate African epistemologies, spirituality remained a vital area of Black ingenuity in the face of violent dispossession on a devastating scale. Ancestors and ancestral spirits, though much maligned by British colonizers, once more played a central role. Whereas during the period of Ndebele conquest in the early nineteenth century they functioned as a means of integrating diverse peoples, now ancestors became a central mechanism for organizing resistance to white presence. As a result, ancestral practices would come to be viewed by colonizers as not only morally suspect, but politically dangerous.

With the establishment of the first mission churches in the 1850s, people in Matabeleland—as British settlers termed the territories under the control of the Ndebele state—developed a nascent awareness of a parallel European cosmological order. Perhaps most significantly, the two worlds had contrasting visions of personhood and the otherworldly. Precolonial society was structured around forms of status that only granted certain people—namely *sangomas* and elders—access to ancestral power. Christian missionaries, in contrast, preached that prayer and sacraments gave anyone access to God. This was accompanied by a broader post-enlightenment ideology that imagined people as individuals who could be extracted from networks of kinship, hierarchy, and other forms of social obligation (Wariboko, 2018). While Mzilikazi found these ideas suspect and largely disregarded missionaries' teachings, which took aim at the organizing principles of Ndebele society, his son and successor Lobengula

developed a more open attitude towards Christianity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009b).[11] Just as his father had integrated autochthonous ideas from the region into an evolving Ndebele cosmology, Lobengula saw parallels between Ndebele ideas about a high god, Mlimo, and the Christian articulation of God. Missionaries, on the other hand, didn't envisage a compromise between the two metaphysical schemes. They came from a society with highly developed ideas about the supremacy of white Anglo-Saxon culture and the inferiority of Black people, their cultures, and political institutions. In the view of missionaries, Christianity and Western metaphysics afforded a total account of reality, and they perceived ancestral practices to be little more than the "superstitions" of a pagan population (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Among the few people who converted in the nineteenth century, missionaries frequently lamented the fragility of their Christian religiosity and continued participation in ancestral rituals. In the differing approaches of Lobengula and British missionaries, we witness the beginnings of a tension that persists to this day: one perspective that views the two systems of knowledge as complimentary and seeks to integrate them, and another that views them as fundamentally incommensurate.

In the 1880s, a much more catastrophic form of colonialism began to be felt in the territories of the Zimbabwean plateau, pioneered by the industrialist Cecil Rhodes. By this time, Rhodes had accrued enormous wealth by consolidating his monopoly on the world's diamond supply and become a prominent political force in the Cape Colony to the south (Rotberg, 1988). As a member of the Cape Parliament, he advocated for policies that would significantly shape the future of Zimbabwe: pushing Black people off their lands with a view not only to making way for European occupation, but also to creating a labor supply and undermining Black political independence. Moreover, Rhodes argued that local white elites like himself should

[11] Lobengula lived from c.1845-1894, and took the throne in 1869.

secure land rights and govern new territories, not colonial officials in London, and formed the British South Africa Company (BSAC) to pursue this agenda. In light of the discovery of vast gold reserves in the Transvaal area around Johannesburg, he imagined that Zimbabwe's landscape would likewise contain riches. He pioneered colonial expansion northwards via the Ndebele kingdom under Lobengula, leveraging the trust and access missionaries had gained in the region. In 1888, Rhodes' emissaries convinced Lobengula to sign a document known as the Rudd Concession, which gave the BSAC exclusive mining rights in Matabeleland, Mashonaland (as they referred to Shona-speaking areas), and other territories that made up present-day Zimbabwe. Lobengula believed the treaty would enable the Ndebele state to benefit from European wealth and technology through trade, while maintaining its political independence and sovereignty over land and people.[12]

Lobengula's agreement to sign the Rudd Concession proved to be a disastrous miscalculation. It quickly became apparent that rather than securing their independence and prosperity, the treaty paved the way to a plundering of the land's resources and full-blown settlement. Using the Rudd Concession as justification, in 1890 Rhodes sent the Pioneer Column—a battalion of several hundred British men who were promised land in return for armed service—to occupy the territory on the premise of securing mining rights. They trekked through Matabeleland and into Mashonaland, formed the nucleus of the white settler community around Salisbury (later Harare), and began the process of land alienation. In 1893, the Ndebele were drawn into armed conflict with the settlers of the BSAC.[13] Vastly outgunned, the kingdom's

[12] Verbally, negotiators assured Lobengula that no more than ten white men would mine in Matabeleland, but the promise was never enshrined in writing.

[13] The history of this period is complex and contested, but many authors argue that the forces of the BSAC fanned the flames of conflicts between the Ndebele and neighboring Shona communities, which they then used as pretext for a direct military confrontation with the Ndebele state.

capital Bulawayo was torched and Lobengula was pursued into the rural hinterlands, where he died in mysterious circumstances in early 1894.[14] Within a matter of months, the BSAC controlled most of Matabeleland and the settler town of Bulawayo was built on the smoldering ruins of Lobengula's capital, which had been the symbol of Ndebele royal power. Full colonial conquest of the new territory of Rhodesia—named in Rhodes' honor—entailed violence and looting on a monumental scale. In the months following Lobengula's overthrow, the whole of Ndebele core territory and the vast majority of their extensive cattle stock passed into white hands. Terence Ranger has argued that what occurred in Zimbabwe in the 1890s was a distinctively aggressive period of colonization in the history of Africa, stating that "Matabeleland in the three years between 1893 and 1896 witnessed a dispossession of Africans and a development of white enterprise unparalleled anywhere else in Central and East Africa" (1967, p. 89).

In light of their swift plundering of land, people, and wealth, British settlers felt secure in their victory. They were confident that without a singular figurehead neither the Ndebele nor Shona would be able to organize and coordinate any kind of substantial resistance. Moreover, their crude caricatures of the two "tribes" served to bolster this view (Ranger, 1985b). They characterized Shona people as peaceful but underdeveloped prior to Ndebele conquest, lacking a sophisticated religious scheme or coherent political organization. In contrast, Ndebele people were portrayed as inherently warlike and brutally oppressive towards the Shona, too preoccupied with military conquest to be concerned with religious life. These stereotypes were not only inaccurate but also rendered invisible the relationships between the two societies. Perhaps most significantly, Shona and Ndebele people shared the material experience of violent dispossession

[14] The exact circumstances and location of Lobengula's death remain a mystery, as does his burial place.

by white settlers. But they also had important spiritual ties to one another that white settlers were unable to appreciate. The Ndebele had arrived as conquerors and alienated land and people from Shona communities, but fostered consent and integration via participation in autochthonous ancestral practices. White settlers were the latest wave of conquerors in the territory, but they stood out as the only group that had failed to acknowledge and make peace with the land's ancestral guardians and spiritual authorities (Lan, 1985). As a result, Shona and Ndebele leaders argued that their suffering stemmed from the wrath of ancestral spirits brought about by settlers' failure to heed their wishes, laying the groundwork for coordinated resistance.

In 1896, senior spirit mediums and priests began to plot a major uprising against white settlement. This event, known today in Shona as the Chimurenga or "revolutionary struggle," remains a pivotal moment in Zimbabwe's national mythology. Networks of spirit mediums and the ancestral spirits they represented proved to be a latent coordinating force. While the institution of ancestral spirits and their living mediums stretched back centuries, and was in some sense inherently conservative, it was also a prime site for the emergence of new authority figures who could speak to changing historical conditions (Ranger, 1967). With the Ndebele king dethroned and local chiefs struggling to assert political authority in a rapidly changing world, spirit mediums were in a unique position to voice opposition to white settlement and lead armed resistance to it. The uprising began in early 1896 with religious leaders in the Matopos advocating for a forcible removal of all white settlers in the country, beginning in the areas surrounding the town of Bulawayo. The coordinated attack took settlers by complete surprise, and hundreds were killed across rural and urban areas as Ndebele people sought to evict those occupying their lands. Months later, a similar uprising began in Mashonaland, which likewise resulted in hundreds of deaths on both sides and continued into 1897.

In this heightened context, a 36-year-old woman named Charwe emerged as a key figure of the resistance. She was the medium of the powerful ancestral spirit Nehanda and resided in the Mazoe region just north of Salisbury.[15] Nehanda had been a royal princess of the fifteenth century and her ancestral spirit was acknowledged to be a significant figure by people across the Zimbabwean plateau. By the 1890s Charwe was a revered medium, widely respected in her region and further afield. When the rebellion broke out in Mazoe in June 1896, Charwe rallied rebels and encouraged ordinary people to take part in the uprising. She spoke as the voice of Nehanda, demanding that the foreigners who had failed to pay respect to her and other ancestors be expelled from the land. Her significance as a prominent figurehead of the rebellion was quickly noticed by colonial authorities and she was arrested in 1897. She was put on trial for her role in the murder of the Mazoe Native Commissioner during the uprising, which she denied, and was found guilty. She was executed by hanging in April 1898, alongside the medium of Nehanda's spirit husband, Kaguvi, and eleven others accused of coordinating the uprisings. While her role is heavily contested among historians—some seeing her as an "innocent woman unjustly accused" (Beach, 1998), and others as a woman at the heart of the "power struggles of her times" (Charumbira, 2008)—Charwe demonstrates that women and others assumed to be marginal in this era could be central actors who shaped the historical outcomes that followed. Today, Nehanda is the most prominent and widely celebrated national ancestor in Zimbabwe. The photograph of her and Kaguvi, taken days before they were executed, remains a potent anticolonial image that is familiar to all Zimbabweans (Fig. 6).

Ultimately, European communication systems and military technologies meant that the resistance movement was crushed. A significant legacy of the uprisings of 1896-97 was not only

[15] Mazoe is the colonial-era spelling and the region is known as Mazowe today. For consistency, I use the spelling Mazoe throughout.

Figure 6. The mediums of Nehanda and Kagubi, shortly before their executions in 1898. Image: Public domain.

heightened suspicion and nervousness among settlers, but also renewed concern about Shona and Ndebele religious practices.[16] Like Nehanda and Kaguvi, a high priest of Mlimo in Matabeleland was identified as a leader of the movement and executed by the British South Africa Police. Having realized that religious figures could operate as political leaders, the colonial government developed a narrative about the uprisings that laid the blame on the credulity of ordinary people and their misguided spiritual practices. With far reaching consequences, the authorities enshrined this new understanding of African metaphysics in a piece of legislation known as the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899. This document sought to extend indigenous ideas about witchcraft to encompass all indigenous spiritual practices (Garbett, 1998). The authors of this legislation grouped together an array of religious authorities—*svikiro* and *sangomas* (mediums), *nangas* and *inyangas* (herbalists and diviners), as well as Mwari and Mlimo priests—and labelled them "witch doctors." In doing so, they took the indigenous category of witchcraft—which had been used to describe evil—and applied it to those whose vocation had been to address such malevolent forces. This entailed a double denial, both of existing ideas about malignant spiritual power and of the beneficence of ancestral spirits. The penalties imposed for the newly enshrined offense of "witchcraft" were staggering; for those established to be propagating ideas about witchcraft "by habit or repute"—for instance, practicing spirits mediums—the penalty was 36 lashes, imprisonment for up to seven years, or a fine of $500 (ibid.).

The Witchcraft Suppression Act and renewed missionary efforts in the aftermath of the 1896-7 uprising not only sought to stamp out indigenous spiritual practices, but to create a new epistemic reality. It involved an effort to forcibly impose European metaphysical categories,

[16] It was around this time that "sodomy" became a crime in Rhodesia with the extension of South African Roman-Dutch into the colony and the establishment of the first European courts. From as early as 1892, when there are five documented cases of men being tried for male-male sexual assault, sodomy was a crime that colonial courts prosecuted with zeal (Epprecht, 2004, p. 105).

dividing the world into natural and non-natural and relegating ideas about both ancestors and witchcraft to the level of fantasy and fraud. In the eyes of British settlers and the emerging Rhodesian state, the fact that the leaders of the rebellion had been spiritual figures reflected little more than the ignorance of Africans. Christian moral frameworks, in contrast, were presented as having a universal applicability and unassailable reality. Colonial administrators would justify an array of acts of violence—forcing communities onto ever smaller and less arable tracts of land, outlawing indigenous traditions, coercing people into wage labor—as acts of benevolence that would speed up their conversion to Christianity and the broader process of "modernization." But despite these efforts, the dynamics that gave rise to the uprisings of 1896-97—particularly the capacity for ancestral spirits to coordinate political action and the unique leadership position of their mediums—would endure, creating a threat to the Rhodesian state that its settlers population believed it had successfully eliminated.

Ancestors in the Liberation Struggle

Over the following decades, the process of material dispossession and metaphysical colonization that began in the 1890s proceeded rapidly. It turned out that the Zimbabwean plateau didn't contain gold deposits on the scale of the Transvaal, and Rhodesia gradually morphed into a settler colony with an economy based around agriculture and industry. The white population grew from around 10,000 in 1900, to 33,000 in 1920, to 75,000 in 1940, and then skyrocketed in the post-war period to reach 225,000 in the 1960s (Brownell, 2010). Yet despite white demographic growth, Black people always outnumbered white people by twenty or thirty to one. In the face of such steep demographic imbalances, the Rhodesian administration sought to maintain white political and economic advantage by rigorously entrenching and policing racial

segregation.[17] Rhodesian policy was designed to "develop" the Black population as laborers for the modern economy, mostly through education and Christianization, while intentionally inhibiting their political and economic aspiration.[18] Over time, Black communities integrated aspects of colonial culture into their lives, with many educated in mission schools and becoming passionate members of the Christian denominations that proliferated throughout the colony. Certain ideas from the European liberal and Christian traditions—as well as more radical Marxist and socialist philosophies—would be used to mobilize the Black population against the injustices of Rhodesian colonialism. Yet as we shall see, central to the struggle for liberation that emerged in the 1960s and 70s were the very ancestral practices and cosmologies that colonial officials assumed they had eradicated.

The consolidation of white political and economic power in Rhodesia was underpinned by expropriation of land and creation of a market economy heavily skewed towards white interests, with steep barriers for Black people to compete on an even footing (R. Palmer, 1977). The Land Apportionment Act of 1931 formally gave white farmers control of over fifty percent of the country's territory and the entirety of the most arable land, while making it illegal for Black people to purchase land in areas designated for white settlement (Pilossof, 2012). The Black population—then numbering over a million—were confined to poor regions known as "Native Purchase Areas" that covered less than thirty percent of the territory (Hammar, 2002).[19] The forced evictions that resulted from this legislation affected people both spiritually and materially.

[17] As Mahmood Mamdani (1996) argues, in African colonial contexts white people were considered "citizens" equipped with rights and liberties, whereas Black people were deemed "subjects" requiring governance by Europeans.

[18] Franz Fanon (1965) has described such colonial contexts as "nervous," an idea that subsequent writers and scholars of Africa have drawn upon to explain some of the policies of colonial administrations and the experience of colonization for Black people (Dangarembga, 1988; Hunt, 1999).

[19] The remainder of the land was set aside for future use.

They severed people from the burial places of their ancestors, spiritually significant sites, and local spirits they knew how to appease (Fontein, 2011). At the same time, overcrowding, poor agricultural yields, and high taxation in Native Purchase Areas were designed to force working age men off the land and into the labor market. As a result, cities like Salisbury and Bulawayo grew rapidly and the divide between urban and rural lifeways deepened over time. The city of Bulawayo that emerged from the ruins of Lobengula's capital was deeply segregated, with the white population controlling the central business district and the northern, eastern, and southern suburbs, and the Black population confined to the densely crowded western suburbs known as the "African Location," downwind of heavy industries and sewage works (Ranger, 2010). Notoriously, Black people weren't allowed to walk on pavements in the city until the 1930s. At the same time, Bulawayo differed from other cities in Rhodesia in important ways; its railway connection to Johannesburg meant it became the country's manufacturing and export center, and it emerged as the most multicultural city in Rhodesia, drawing in migrants from across Southern and Eastern Africa. The city's African population remained majority Ndebele, but a substantial proportion were Shona, Tonga, and Sotho-speaking migrants from other regions of the country and neighboring colonies like Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia), Malawi (Nyasaland), and Mozambique (Portuguese East Africa). From the beginning, Bulawayo was home to a multiplicity of spiritual practices and languages, while retaining close ties to rural areas of Matabeleland.

During the early decades of colonial rule, the number of Christian converts across the country steadily increased. By the turn of the twentieth century Anglicans, Jesuits, Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, Lutherans, Brethren in Christ, and Dutch Reformed Churches had all established missions in Matabeleland (Welch, 2008). Mission stations were granted wide

influence over indigenous communities and were the only place Africans could learn to read and write, a key source of advancement in a rapidly changing colonial society (Bhebe, 1979a; Summers, 2002). Within a matter of decades, many converts became ardent evangelists and Christianity was spread locally by African missionaries and prophets (Fields, 1985). During the first half of the twentieth century Christianity gradually became an indigenous religion with a multiplicity of local articulations, while remaining part of a broader social context in which ancestral practices endured (Urban-Mead, 2018); that is, during this period of open competition between traditions, Zimbabwe's polyontological religious landscape began to take shape and people began to cast idiosyncratic trajectories for themselves. The missionary demand for people to abandon precolonial practices was especially appealing to those who had been marginalized in precolonial society, like women and young men (Urban-Mead, 2015). But for older men, outlawing practices like brewing beer—a core ancestral rite—and polygamy threatened to undermine their social status and authority. In other cases, African initiated congregations broke away from mission churches, seeking a refuge from the racism of mission churches and aspiring to integrate aspects of Christianity and ancestral metaphysics (Pretorius & Jafta, 1997). This split would enable people to navigate the demands of competing worlds and worldviews, but also pulled different people in different directions, giving rise to tensions along the lines of gender, generation, and education.

By the 1940s and 50s, the Rhodesian state and its white settler population was increasingly confident of its hegemony. Inspired by ascendant ideas about modernization and the capacity for the state to reshape society in the post-war era, colonial administrators intensified their efforts to intervene in and regulate Black life (J. Alexander, 2006). In rural areas, officials sought to enhance agricultural productivity through increasingly coercive policies, including aggressive

attempts to determine farming techniques, high levels of taxation, and evictions and resettlements. These interventions sparked many local protests that were violently put down by the police, fomenting growing resentment towards the Rhodesian state. In cities like Bulawayo, sprawling and densely built suburbs for Black residents grew rapidly and trade unions and community associations sprang up to represent the interests of Black city dwellers. At the same time, there was a growing class of mission-educated Black elites who could express grievances about racial discrimination and were inspired by anticolonial movements and philosophies originating from across Africa. In Bulawayo, leaders like Joshua Nkomo demanded the right for Black people to own rather than lease property and to vote in city council elections (Ranger, 2010). Nkomo and others mobilized a coordinated response and inspire urban protest movements, which were invariably put down with force by the colonial administration. Across Rhodesia, recurrent local uprisings reflected the reality that the colonial state never succeeded in monopolizing African worldviews to the extent it had hoped. As Jocelyn Alexander writes, "The colonial state's 'hegemony' was fragile, and there were real limits to its capacity to command, to shape consciousness and identity, and to direct change" (2006, p. 3). Indeed, despite the fact that people in rural and urban areas had come to see themselves as different to one another, the state's heavy-handed interventions in the post-war era helped forge a sense of shared interest and struggle across geographic and class lines.

By the 1960s, Rhodesia increasingly stood out on the global stage. In 1957, Ghana became the first African colony to secure independence from Britain, followed by Tanzania in 1961, Kenya in 1963, and Rhodesia's northern neighbors Zambia and Malawi in 1964 (Nugent, 2004). A large number of the white inhabitants of these former colonies resettled in Rhodesia, one of the last remaining outposts of white minority rule, along with a large number of former European

servicemen drawn to its idealized vision of colonial life. This helped consolidate Rhodesian identity around the notion that it was preserving a white colonial experience and outlook that was vanishing elsewhere (White, 2015). At the same time, the British government insisted that it wouldn't grant colonies independence until they agreed to fully enfranchise their adult populations (Mtisi et al., 2009a). White Rhodesians were terrified by the prospect of full enfranchisement; despite the large influx of white settlers, their numbers never accounted for more than five percent of the population. In November 1965, the government of Rhodesia—led by prime minister Ian Smith—issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), proclaiming itself independent from Britain without granting any political rights to the Black population. Almost instantly, it became a pariah on the global stage. It was the first country to be subject to economic sanctions by the United Nations and became recognized only by the apartheid government of neighboring South Africa. This meant that by the 1970s, Black Rhodesians were among the last remaining colonized people in Africa.

In response to the UDI and the entrenchment of white rule, simmering Black grievances gave rise to a nascent nationalist movement. Under the strain of tensions about how to respond to the Rhodesian government's efforts to suppress the movement, it split into two factions largely divided along ethnic lines: ZANU and ZAPU (Mlambo, 2009). ZANU (an acronym for the Zimbabwe African National Union) came to represent Shona-majority regions of the country under the leadership of Ndabaningi Sithole and Robert Mugabe, and developed a militant wing known as ZANLA. In contrast, ZAPU (short for the Zimbabwe African People's Union) represented the Ndebele-majority regions of the country, including Matabeleland and the city of Bulawayo. It was led by Joshua Nkomo and formed a militant wing known as ZIPRA. The split between ZANU and ZAPU would have far reaching consequences for ethnic divisions in

Zimbabwe after independence. At first, the Rhodesian government successfully quashed armed rebellions by imprisoning and exiling the movements' leaders. But by the early 1970s, the armed units of ZANLA and ZIPRA began to recruit greater numbers of people in the rural areas and posed a real threat to the white population as an armed and coordinated guerrilla insurgency (Mtisi et al., 2009b). While the guerrilla movement drew on various ideological sources—pan-African anticolonialism, Christian and liberal accounts of human equality, Marxist-socialist ideas about economic and racial injustice, and Maoist philosophies of guerrilla warfare (Ranger, 1985a)—ancestral cosmologies proved capable of motivating and uniting the diverse array of constituencies necessary to take on the Rhodesian state.

Across the country—in the countryside and in cities, in Shona, Ndebele, and other ethno-linguistic regions—ancestors gained a renewed purchase as a source of moral guidance and justification in the fight against colonial occupation. The role of ancestors in the liberation struggle involved a renewed emphasis on—and, in many cases, a re-narration of—memories of the anticolonial uprisings of the 1890s. Retelling the history of the 1890s and reviving ancestral practices were a means of galvanizing pride and confidence in African culture in response to its denigration by the colonial state. Indeed, the nationalist movement began referring to the uprisings of the 1890s as the First Chimurenga ("revolutionary struggle") and their own conflict as the Second Chimurenga. In particular, Nehanda and Charwe—the ancestral spirit and her medium who had been executed by the British in 1898—became icons of the liberation movement. As Ruramisai Charumbira argues, "Nehanda-Charwe and the African past gained currency in African nationalist rhetoric once it became clear that invoking the ancestors—and the stolen land—resonated with the majority of Africans in the cities and in the countryside" (2015, p. 180). During this time, Nehanda went from being remembered as a local figure in the Mazoe

region to a "national" ancestor whose appeal transcended ethnic, geographical, and religious lines. This also helped to cultivate an imagination of Zimbabwe as a nation, one that people were fighting for regardless of their ethnic and political affiliations. Moreover, reviving memories of the 1890s enabled those who held Christian religious identities to respect Nehanda and Charwe as historical and political figures, even if they departed from other dimensions of ancestral cosmologies.

Ancestral practices themselves were transformed by the liberation struggle. In the rural areas, this manifested in a shift of power away from local chiefs and towards spirit mediums, whose position became politicized with the onset of guerrilla warfare. As we have seen, chiefs historically derived their legitimacy by claiming descent from powerful ancestors known as *mhondoro* in Shona and *amadlozi* in Ndebele, while spirit mediums were channels for these spirits. Over time, chiefs had increasingly become associated with the interference of the colonial state—often installed or replaced according to their willingness to cooperate with Rhodesian authorities—creating a vacuum for the political authority bestowed by ancestors (Lan, 1985). Gradually, as ordinary people came to view spirit mediums as the more legitimate representatives of ancestral spirits, political authority shifted to them. Rural communities were amenable to the injunctions of powerful ancestors from the past, while the Rhodesian state was unable to appreciate the political threat spirit mediums might pose. Similarly, in urban Bulawayo, Joshua Nkomo—whose ancestry was Sotho and Kalanga, and therefore not affiliated with the lineage of the Ndebele royal family—came to present himself as the "incarnation of Ndebele monarchs" (Ranger, 2010, p. 242). He went from being a social worker and trade union organizer to a politician known affectionately as "Father Zimbabwe," in part by paying heed to spirit mediums in the Matopos and affiliating himself with the symbols of Ndebele royal power.

Throughout the country, during the 1960s and 70s, there was a revived interest in and affiliation with both their ancestors who'd fought in the first anticolonial struggle, and ancestral spirits from the deep past who helped bolster political authority in the present.

Both of these transformations, drawn from rural and urban regions of Zimbabwe, illustrate that despite the changes brought about by ninety years of colonialism, political authority and legitimacy were still intertwined with ancestors. Moreover, they demonstrate that ancestors and their living mediums existed not as static and unchanging relics of the precolonial past, but as potent sources of spiritual and political power that could be rearticulated and redeployed to speak to changing historical conditions. By the late 1970s, the human and economic costs of waging war were mounting for both sides. As guerrilla warfare spilled over into urban areas, the pressure on the Rhodesian state became particularly acute. After several failed attempts at a settlement, the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement paved the way for an independent Zimbabwe in which Black people would have equal political and economic rights. At the negotiating table were both Mugabe and Nkomo, the former of whom would become prime minister and later president of Zimbabwe. The fate of the latter would represent the consequences of the deep ethnic divisions that had been temporarily buried by the success of the liberation war. Moreover, the Lancaster House Agreement left the "land question"—that is, the vast disparity between Black and white land ownership—unresolved. This meant that although Black people would be politically enfranchised, millions would remain in poverty in the absence of access to arable land. But in April 1980, as the British flag was lowered and the new flag of the independent nation was raised while Bob Marley played "Viva Zimbabwe" to jubilant crowds in Harare, it seemed that the injustices of Rhodesian colonialism were coming to an end, and a more hopeful era was dawning.

Ancestors in Postcolonial Politics

In the newly independent Zimbabwe, ancestors became highly visible symbols of Zimbabwean nationhood. Where they had been suppressed and demonized by the Rhodesian state now they came into full view as markers of a resurgent African pride. They also became tied to the institutions of modern government, over time becoming intertwined with the propaganda of the party that won the first elections, ZANU. In the years after independence, ZANU would repeatedly leverage its telling of the past to question the belonging of its political opponents. At the same time, its style of governance was increasingly characterized by a pattern of violence and mismanagement, laying the groundwork for mounting economic crises. Mugabe's crude attempts to use ancestors to buttress his power ultimately cast doubt on their capacity to remain a potent political force. Meanwhile, in light of the state's failure to deliver on its promises of prosperity, religious life increasingly became a site for the expression of moral and economic grievances. As we shall see, one manifestation of this was the ascendence of Pentecostal Christianity. Its churches not only promised material riches but also framed ancestors as demons. These twin threats—ancestors' affiliation with authoritarian politics and their demonization by newly popular churches—called into question their capacity to speak compellingly to the postcolonial present.

While ZANU vocally repudiated the legacy of colonialism and officially asserted a socialist ideology, it mirrored certain aspects of the Rhodesian state's style of governance and national myth-making practices (Charumbira, 2015; Moore, 2005). It often mimicked the modernizing language, ethos, and policies of the Rhodesian era while asserting pride in key symbols of African culture. A notable example of this was the transformation of the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act. The legislation remained on the books but the boundaries of

legitimate and illegitimate spiritual practice were carefully reorganized (Garbett, 1998). Witch-finding was accorded a new metaphysical and quasi-scientific reality and those who were determined to practice witchcraft were harshly punished. At the same time a new professional guild—the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers' Association, or ZINATHA—was established to accredit legitimate ancestral practitioners (Jackson, 2005). Spirit mediums and diviners were compelled to register with ZINATHA and were issued with certificates and licenses as proof of their qualifications (Fig. 7). This served to give aspects of the precolonial metaphysical order an aura of legitimacy and recuperate it from total moral condemnation, but also gave the state power to determine who and what would be considered legitimate.

Figure 7. A spirit medium's official certification issued by ZINATHA. Photo by author.

Likewise, the ancestors ZANU claimed as its own were accorded national significance, in the same way that the Rhodesian state had venerated its founding fathers. Where Rhodes had been held in an almost mythical reverence, Nehanda now ascended to the status of national ancestor, with streets and hospitals named after her and monuments erected in her honor. Having once been

tied to a fairly small territory around the village of Mazoe, she was now presented as an ancestor with influence over the whole country. Yet there existed contradictions surrounding the status of those who actively practiced ancestral traditions (see Fig. 8). For instance, when Nehanda's living medium in rural Mazoe petitioned government officials for meetings to convey ancestral insights, her requests were ignored and she was looked down upon as "backwards" by those in power (Charumbira, 2015). This indicated the emergence of a new state of affairs in Zimbabwe, where ancestors became symbolically significant forms of state power—often as a form of invented tradition—but the actual practice of ancestral spirituality continued to struggle to compete with the projects of Christianization and modernization. The result was that ancestral spirituality remained confined to the fringes of public urban life.

Figure 8. A cartoon from the state-owned The Sunday Mail newspaper, published July 28th 1985. The cartoon illustrates the extent to which colonial stereotype about traditional spiritual practices carried over into the postcolonial era. Photo by author.

The contradictions surrounding ZANU's approach to ancestral practices in the early post-independence era was also evident in the state's questioning of the belonging of various groups during this period. As many Zimbabwean feminists have argued, Nehanda was a female ancestor who was paradoxically used to underpin masculinist idioms of state power and political legitimacy (Charumbira, 2013; Vera, 1993). As time went on, the true bearers of political power in Zimbabwe were those who could invoke their participation in the armed liberation struggle, which few women could (Lyons, 2004). As a result, Nehanda's status as a symbol of the nation did little to materially improve women's lives or access to the institutions of power. As we have seen, this increasingly pronounced masculinist ideology also laid the groundwork for the emergence of a new genre of homophobic political rhetoric (Epprecht, 2005). Alongside these gendered components of ZANU's nationalism was an equally pernicious ethno-centrism, which implied that only those of Shona lineages had a truly legitimate claim to power—and, in some cases, right to land—in the new state. Shona people comprised around 70% of the population, a large enough majority to determine national election results. Ndebele people made up around 20% of the population, and the remaining 10% were members of various minority groups. In what had always been a multi-ethnic territory, the political divisions of the liberation movement became entrenched and ideas about ethnic difference deepened. It was Shona icons and ancestors like Nehanda who came to symbolize the nation, and ZANU implied that its ancestors were the original autochthons and protectors of the land (Lan, 1985). The exclusion of other lineages indicated the emergence of claims—both implicit and explicit—that Zimbabwe was a Shona country and that the presence of other ethnic groups in the territory was illegitimate (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009a).

The effects of these assertions were acutely felt in Matabeleland. When Zimbabwe achieved independence, the fact that there had been two guerrilla armies—ZANLA and ZIPRA—meant that there remained a sizable contingent of combatants whose loyalty to the governing party was questionable (J. Alexander et al., 2000). When ZANU resoundingly beat ZAPU in the first free elections, some ZAPU supporters and ZIPRA militants refused to be integrated into the national army. As leaders of a new and fragile state, the ZANU government perceived these combatants as "dissidents" who might seek to stage a coup. Nkomo was a clear threat, being labelled "a cobra in the house" by Mugabe, and fled the country in 1983. The same year, Mugabe deployed the notorious Fifth Brigade to root out dissidents in Matabeleland. The Fifth Brigade was a regiment that had been trained by North Korea, was filled with ZANU loyalists, and answered directly to the Prime Minister. It proceeded to carry out a campaign of incredible violence in Matabeleland, targeting not only former guerrilla fighters but also the civilian population at large. The violence that ensued became known as *Gukurahundi*, a Shona term that means "to sweep away the rubbish," and involved thousands of cases of abduction, torture, and murder, resulting in the deaths of around 20,000 people.[20] While the scale of the violence remains etched into the collective memory and identity of many Ndebele people (Werbner, 1991), ZANU never admitted that it occurred. To this day, people in Bulawayo talk about Gukurahundi in hushed voices, nervous that mentioning it might indicate opposition to the state. One of its legacies was to consolidate Ndebele identity as one that exists in opposition to the Shona-speaking majority, characterized by social, political, and economic marginalization (Ngwenya, 2018). Today, ZANU rarely wins political support in Bulawayo and Matabeleland

[20] Gukurahundi literally means "the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains," but in its metaphorical usage it means to sweep or clear rubbish.

more broadly, which remains an opposition stronghold, and the region receives limited investment from central government.

The persecution of Gukurahundi and creation of the Fifth Brigade were some of the earliest indications of Mugabe's aspirations to consolidate his grip on power. In 1987, he ousted President Canaan Banana and amended the constitution to combine the roles of head of state, head of government, and commander of the armed forces into one, while simultaneously abolishing presidential term limits (Chan, 2003). Moreover, he integrated what was left of ZAPU into ZANU, creating a new party known as ZANU-PF. As Mugabe developed an increasingly authoritarian style of rule, the first signs of Zimbabwe's economic troubles began to be felt. Due to the severe sanctions of the UDI period, Zimbabwe's economy had been heavily imbalanced and many of its industries struggled to remain competitive with the easing of sanctions (McIndoe-Calder, 2019). At the same time, Zimbabwe was subject to International Monetary Fund's policy of structural adjustment, which was aimed at drastically reducing state expenditure and the number of people on the state's payroll, resulting in mass layoffs. Combined, these forces led to increasing levels of unemployment in both the private and public sectors. By the late 1990s, Zimbabwe's inflation began to creep upwards and people turned out onto the streets to protest the government's mismanagement of the economy. In rural areas, the grievances of subsistence farmers grew in light of the persistence of land inequities, and in protest landless people began squatting on white-owned farms.

Mugabe's first response was to crush protests and evict squatters (Raftopoulos, 2009). But as the scale of dissent grew and his options dwindled, he seized on the idea of land redistribution as a populist rallying call. He drew up a constitutional amendment that would allow the government to compulsorily acquire white-owned land without compensation. When this

proposal was put to a referendum and defeated in 2000, he turned to war veterans' wing of ZANU-PF to implement the program under the banner of the Fast-Track Land Reform Program. White farmers and their Black farm workers were treated violently by ZANU-PF paramilitaries. Not only were farm owners left with little legal remedy, but millions of Black farm workers were excluded from benefitting from redistribution and the bulk of farms were transferred directly to senior members of ZANU-PF. Moreover, the landless who were resettled on seized farmland had no formal deeds and struggled to access loans to develop the land, turning millions of acres of commercial farmland into unproductive smallholdings. While inequities in land ownership urgently needed redressing, the effect of Fast-Track Land Reform was to destroy the country's agricultural productivity and lay the groundwork for a more far-reaching economic crisis. Maize production—the country's staple food—fell by 69% and total agricultural output fell by 58%, making Zimbabwe the world's fastest-shrinking economy (Munangagwa, 2009). As the government continued to pursue a war in Congo, it printed money to pay its bills. By 2003, inflation stood at 600%, climbing to 1200% by 2006 and in May 2008 reached over 1,000,000% (Hanke & Kwok, 2009). In November 2008, Zimbabwe registered the second highest level of inflation ever recorded, with the annual rate hitting 89,700,000,000,000,000,000,000%. As the economy crumbled, unemployment reached over 90%. In the context of such extreme economic conditions, millions—perhaps as many as forty percent of Zimbabwe's population—left the country, many crossing the border into neighboring South Africa (Crush & Tevera, 2010). Eventually, the central bank abandoned the currency and adopted the US dollar, the economy left in tatters. In the decade since the currency's collapse, Zimbabwe has continued to experience high levels of inflation, commodity shortages, and high unemployment (J. L. Jones, 2010).

In this context, where both political institutions and the economy offered little hope, Zimbabwe saw a surge in popularity of prosperity-oriented Pentecostal churches (Maxwell, 1998). While Pentecostalism had a deep history in the region, detailed in the next chapter, the emergence of prosperity theology—a gospel that promised economic rewards in return for certain forms of Christian devotion (K. Bowler, 2018)—seemed to speak to the disillusionment that many people felt towards the state in the post-independence era. Since the 1980s, Pentecostal denominations have grown exponentially across sub-Saharan Africa, many of them winning over congregants with the reassurance that piety could solve the problems that the market economy and state could not (Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001). Alongside prosperity teachings, a central tenet of these novel forms of Pentecostalism were their vehement rejection of ancestral practices. Whereas previous waves of mission Christianity encouraged people to cease participation in ancestral rituals but often quietly tolerated them, Pentecostal churches made the rejection of ancestors a central creed (Meyer, 1998). These churches forged a theology that recast ancestral spirits as demons who were responsible for their descendants' suffering and hardships. Across Southern Africa, Pentecostal churches were hugely successful in winning converts and were overwhelmingly favored by the young. The effect of Pentecostal preaching was the creation of an elaborate scheme for the identification of curses and exorcism of malevolent spirits, which paradoxically revived interest in ancestors.[21] These churches created a hegemonic—though not totalizing—discursive field in urban areas, which made public participation in ancestral practices taboo (Chitando, 2001). Those who openly practice ancestral spirituality—including those registered under the auspices of ZINATHA—are even more maligned for doing so than they

[21] Much as Michel Foucault (1978) showed for the "incitement to discourse" in relation to sexuality in the nineteenth century, calls to suppress supposedly dangerous phenomena often enhance their social significance and result in the creation of new knowledge about the topic in question.

were several decades ago. As a result, contemporary Pentecostalism's uncompromising stance pushed people to engage with ancestors largely in private. Nonetheless, the rise of Pentecostalism illustrates that concerns with ancestors continue to crosscut denominational boundaries and disguises the endurance of Zimbabwe's polyontological religious landscape. Today, ancestors remain evocative symbols of the anticolonial struggles of the 1890s and 1970s. ZANU-PF's cynical attempts to co-opt ancestors as their own icons alongside Pentecostal injunctions to eschew ancestral practices have undeniably undermined their saliency among the youth. Despite this, the ruling party continues to deploy ancestors in a bid to keep the struggles of the liberation war relevant and underline its monopoly on power. Since 2017, when Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa staged a coup against the 93-year-old Mugabe, the new

Figure 9. The unveiling of Nehanda's statue in Harare in May 2021. President Emmerson Mnangagwa is pictured in green. From: The Smithsonian Museum, http://www.smithsonianmag.com, (accessed April 4, 2022).

president turned to ancestors to legitimize his authority (Mavima, 2021). In 2021, he unveiled a large statue of Nehanda in Harare's central business district, describing it as "a bold and unapologetic statement that we are a people who know who we are and where we came from" (Chingono, 2021). The move was quickly criticized by opposition voices in the country as a thinly veiled attempt to distract from the country's ongoing economic troubles. Author Tsitsi Dangarembga, for instance, described it as an attempt to "co-opt a historical figure as a partisan figure" (ibid.). But there are signs that ZANU-PF hasn't been entirely successful in controlling either the meaning or political potency of ancestors. During the #ThisFlag anti-government protests in 2016, Nehanda was sometimes invoked by those who opposed the government. As Kathryn Takabvirwa (Forthcoming) describes, during the trial of a war veteran named Douglas Mahiya, who had been accused of "undermining the president," a woman stood up to criticize the prosecution. In an impassioned speech, she cited Nehanda's last known words—"these bones will rise again"—to challenge ZANU-PF's claim to be the true inheritor of Nehanda's struggle for political emancipation, arguing instead that "*We* are the bones of Nehanda." This incident illustrates that despite the milieu in which young Zimbabweans come of age and the government's attempts to monopolize their legacy, ancestors remain a resilient and enduring repertoire of symbols and associations, heavily contested but available for each new generation as it grapples with its own dilemmas and struggles over power, authority, and belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have witnessed just some of the many contests that have been mediated by and through ancestors over the course of several centuries of Zimbabwean history. The episodes surveyed here feed into the multifarious strands of discourse that shape understandings

of ancestors today, many of which appear to be at odds with one another. For these reasons, it is not possible to speak of a singular "tradition" or tell a single story about ancestral spirituality in contemporary Zimbabwe (Palmié, 2013). Rather than be overwhelmed by the scope and apparent contradictions these discourses apparently display, however, I have focused on particular historical moments in which debates about ancestors have been heightened, illuminating the kinds of claims and processes that ancestors mediate and facilitate. We have seen how they have enabled people to make claims to authority by asserting connection to both the charismatic spiritual power that ancestors represent and key moments of historical struggle. Centuries after Nehanda's spirit died and 120 years after her medium Charwe was executed, Nehanda remains such a powerful figure in Zimbabwe because she embodies both of these dimensions. Equally, because her resonances are so broad, narratives about her can never be monopolized by one person or a singular telling of the past. Indeed, today there are at least two people claiming to be her medium in the Mazoe region today and many more claim to speak on her behalf, from the streets of Bulawayo's high density suburbs to the halls of Zimbabwe's government.

When young queer people develop an interest in ancestral spirituality in the present, they do so in the light of this complex history, in the process rearranging their understandings of these currents of discourse. Miriro's words at the beginning of this chapter express the motivations of many young Zimbabweans when they seek to approach ancestors afresh. Her notion of a "spiritual, bloodline-filled identity," one that missionaries encouraged people to "forget," captures the palimpsestic layers we have encountered in this chapter. It echoes elements of the precolonial cosmologies in which ancestors were embedded, particularly the notion of a metaphysical order in which spirits shaped the lives of the living. It speaks to the violence of the colonialization of Zimbabwe and the lengths missionaries and administrators went to shatter

what came before, including explicit attempts to sever religious practices from ideas about bloodlines and ancestry. Furthermore, Miriro's words convey the injustices that motivated the liberation struggle, the loss of identity that came about through the alienation of land and a state that sought to reshape almost every facet of African life.

But Miriro's language also bears traces of more recent idioms and ideas. Identity, for one, is a concept that appeared in the wake of the consolidation of ideas about ethnicity and nationhood, and in this sense is a legacy of both colonialism and the project of modernization (Chatterjee, 1993; Hall, 2011). Contemporary ideas about identity are also informed by more recent discourses that emerged in the wake of identity-based activism, notably those relating to gender and sexual identity. Finally, Miriro's use of the word "spiritual" indicates a departure from the idiom of "religion," which underpinned earlier accounts of ancestors. As we will see in the next chapter, speaking of ancestors in terms of spirituality reflects recent innovations in religious culture, particularly Pentecostal theologies of the self and the otherworldly. The following chapters pick up on the shifts that Miriro's use of the words spirituality and identity represent, investigating how young queer people in Bulawayo bring novel concepts and perspectives to bear on ancestors and initiate their own process of reinvention.

Chapter 2

"Something Spiritual":

Queer Pentecostalism and the Quest for Spiritual Fulfilment

"I think of myself as an apostate now," Awande said, explaining her break from the Catholic Church. Born into a devout family at the heart of Bulawayo's Catholic establishment, Catholicism was the only faith she knew growing up. We were speaking on a hot day in mid-February, and Awande told me she knew instinctively that the following day was Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent in the Christian year. "The whole religious calendar is so embedded in me," she told me. Awande's parents met and married in the Catholic Church and she had been baptized in the church as a child. In her words she took on a "ridiculous Christian name" upon her First Communion, and remembered spending weekends in her teenage years evangelizing in her parish. She was still proud of having been the youngest catechist, or religious instructor, in Bulawayo's history. When she reached eighteen and was uncertain about her future, Awande recalled coming home one day and finding several nuns from the Dominican Sisters sitting in the family's living room at her parents' behest, with an invitation for her to join the order. She politely but firmly declined the offer. "I didn't want to put on those boring uniforms," she joked, gesturing to her black satin bomber jacket and star-print pants, a reflection of her more expressive personal style.

As she entered adulthood, Awande began to move away from the church. It's not that she felt animosity towards the institution or its members, but rather that the repetitiveness of Mass and its rituals eventually left her feeling "spiritually dead," as she put it. She had grown to

understand herself as queer but it wasn't a central factor in her departure from the church. Indeed, she found that the Catholic Church rarely preached about same-sex intimacies and generally avoided discussing the topic. "I never really heard anything like that from the Catholics, they're just not really interested in homosexuality," Awande explained. Rather, the issue was that she found priests in the church saw their work as "more of a profession than a calling" and presided over services with little passion or charisma. She appreciated that they were devoted to the pastoral work of ministering to the poor and organizing meals for the homeless, but the priests she encountered were unable to provide the spiritual sustenance she craved. "I knew I was dry inside, and what I needed was something spiritual," she said.

That desire for "something spiritual," it turned out, would be satisfied by a Pentecostal church. Known for ecstatic prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit and propagating the evangelical idea of developing a personal relationship with God, Pentecostal churches have exploded across sub-Saharan Africa in recent decades. They're scattered throughout cities like Bulawayo, many of them small breakaway congregations from larger churches, while some have grown to have tens of thousands of members and seed new churches further afield. Their expressive style of prayer and encouragement for congregants to forge a relationship with God unmediated by pastoral authority are exactly the kind of experience that young people like Awande think of as "spiritual," in contrast to the "religious" emphasis on ritual and hierarchy that they associate with mainline[1] churches, which have roots in the first wave of mission Christianity in the nineteenth century. "I think it was destined that I go to the Pentecostal world," Awande said.

There was just one issue, however. As Awande conceded, "Pentecostal churches are *very* homophobic compared to the Catholic Church." As many queer people in Bulawayo agree, one

[1] As I explain further below, in Zimbabwe "mainline" refers to institutionalized, non-Pentecostal churches, whether Protestant or Catholic.

of the distinctive features of Pentecostal churches in comparison to older mainline denominations is their vocal preaching about homosexuality, part of a broader emphasis on the intimate lives of their congregants (Bochow & Van Dijk, 2012; Burchardt, 2014; Lyonga, 2016; Van Klinken, 2014). In the words of another interlocutor, Danny, who spent his teenage years in a Pentecostal congregation, "Pentecostals talk about sexuality all the time—*all* the time!" Not only do they often preach about same-sex intimacies, but they have a reputation for focusing intensely on members of their own congregations they suspect to be queer. As Danny explained, "If they notice you, they make sure the *whole* sermon is all about you. You know how it is—they start talking about Adam and Eve, Adam and Steve, that kind of nonsense. Sometimes it's Sodom and Gomorrah, but it's the same story." When I asked about the Pentecostal church Awande attended, she raised her eyebrows and confirmed: "That church was very, very homophobic. The way they would look at me…," she tailed off, her memories echoing Danny's experiences of being singled out for perceived gender transgression.

In this chapter, I show that the tension between the things Awande liked about Pentecostalism and the things that made her feel unwelcome ultimately opened the door to a new way of thinking about religious practice and the possibility of forging new queer theologies. In contrast to literature on Christianity in Africa that presents Pentecostal conversion as a move away from the old ways and the embracing of a new identity (Marshall, 2009; Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2004, 2007)—literally, of being Born Again—for many of my interlocutors encountering Pentecostalism is often the beginning of a more wide-ranging search for "spiritual" fulfilment that takes people in many directions, and often ultimately leads them away from Pentecostal congregations. At the heart of this change, I suggest, is embracing the evangelical idea of a personal relationship with God and cultivating a conviction of their own capacity to

discern spiritual paths for themselves. In the first part of the chapter, I describe the frustrations young people feel about churches that are considered "mainline" in the Zimbabwean context, like the Catholic Church, and show that underlying this dissatisfaction is a craving for more expressive and ultimately spiritual forms of worship. Next, I discuss the history of Pentecostalism in Southern Africa, and illustrate the various currents that have fed into contemporary landscape of Pentecostal churches in Bulawayo, notably a new and intimate conception of the Christian God. Then, I describe the forms of homophobia that young queer people often encounter in Pentecostal spaces, which threatens their active participation in these churches in the long run. Finally, I show how young queer people cultivate a strong sense of their personal relationship with God, one that enables them to develop a new ethos towards religious practice and lays the groundwork for more open-ended theological engagements.

Mainline Childhoods and the Longing for Spirituality

"A lot of young people feel detached from worship in the church and want more *expression*," Sandile explained, speaking of his own Anglican Church. "People are drawn to the more expressive acts of worship in Pentecostal churches—it's very different to the Victorian, English style where you sit and listen and don't show any emotion," he laughed. Sandile was a priest in his thirties who ministered at an Anglican church in Bulawayo. He was openly gay, engaged to his partner, and a vocal queer rights advocate who worked with several organizations in the city. We sat in a meeting room in his church complex, the walls adorned with the portraits of white men who had held prominent positions in the diocese over its one-hundred-and-thirty-year history, with just two portraits of more recent Black clergymen. Sandile was dressed in all black with a thin white clerical collar that marked him out as a priest. He was well aware that the

scene he described, a sedate and uninspiring Sunday service, is the image that many young people had in mind when they think of his own Anglican Church. “It’s so reserved and it’s all about ritual,” he went on. “Especially here in Matabeleland, there’s so much emphasis on the ritual—you have to genuflect, you have to lift up the Host, have to get every part exactly right.” Genuflection refers to bowing in reverence, and when I attended services at the cathedral I noticed people nod towards the altar as they entered the building. The Host is the bread that is consecrated by the priest during the Eucharist, a weekly service that commemorates the Last Supper. The language and idioms of the Anglican Church reflect centuries of convention and a reverence for tradition in the way worship is conducted. They also signal its emphasis on hierarchy and the role priests play as voices of social and spiritual authority. “There’s beauty in that ritual,” Sandile concluded, “but it doesn’t allow for much expression.”

Sandile and I were discussing the challenges that the Pentecostal movement posed for churches like his, a common theme across Africa in the wake of the explosion of Pentecostalism in the 1990s (A. H. Anderson, 2019; Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Engelke, 2010; Kalu, 2008). Unlike some in the Anglican establishment, he acknowledged the critiques made by young people about the formality of certain customs in mainline churches. In Zimbabwe, “mainline” is a term generally used to distinguish Pentecostal from non-Pentecostal churches. It is used in a way that minimizes differences between Protestants and Catholics, both of which are considered mainline, and also subsumes denominations like Methodism, Lutheranism, Baptism, Brethren in Christ, Seventh Day Adventism, the Salvation Army, Mormonism, and the Dutch Reformed Church. All of these institutions were founded in Europe and North America, sent missionaries to establish congregations across Africa during the colonial era, and remain headquartered in the West. Outside of the mainline designation are African-Initiated Churches,

which combine elements of indigenous spiritual practice with Christianity, and newer Pentecostal churches. These churches tend to have been founded in Africa, some specifically in Zimbabwe, and have leadership structures based on the continent. As Sandile's assessment indicates, many young Zimbabweans view mainline churches as overly focused on ritual and controlled by elders, with minimal room for individual expression and—some argue—for more personal forms of religious experience. Services follow an established order, often one devised centuries ago, and innovations take decades to implement. Older members of these churches often wear uniforms, brightly colored robes and hats that designate their association with particular denominations or congregations. All of these customs feel increasingly uninspiring and old-fashioned to younger people.

For queer people, mainline environments pose particular problems, though rarely in the form of explicit homophobia. As Awande mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, mainline churches are generally seen as either unconcerned with questions of same-sex intimacies or too nervous to discuss them openly. Overtly homophobic preaching, such as sermons that dwell extensively on the topic of same-sex intimacies, are rare. Indeed, in some pockets there exists quiet support. Sandile explained that queer members of the Anglican Church were increasingly at ease to discuss their sexuality with clergy. "The deans are very supportive in terms of getting counselling, accepting yourself, living that truth," he said. "Some people have even found committed relationships within the church. We might not bless the union—because that's the position the church still has—but you know that you and your partner have the support of your priest," he explained. When a member of the congregation turns to him with questions about their sexuality, he told me, "I say to them, 'It's a safe space. We're not going to judge you.'"

Although mainline churches do not foreground same-sex intimacies in sermons and official teachings, they do express concerns about gender and sexuality in other ways. Like Awande, Jude grew up in a devout Catholic family and says that the topic of same-sex intimacies rarely came up. “One of the things I actually like about the Catholic Church is that they don’t preach about homosexuality,” Jude said. “They preach about being a good person, being kind to one another—there’s none of that dramatic doom and gloom preaching!,” they laughed. But the absence of vocal homophobia doesn’t mean that queer people don’t experience other forms of policing and marginalization within the church. As a teenager, Jude began to think of themselves as non-binary and moved towards a more masculine gender presentation, and encountered attempts to police their gender expression. “I’ve never really found anyone who can give me a perfect and reasonable answer as to why I cannot wear trousers in church,” Jude said with exasperation. “I used to wear skirts and dresses, but with time I became really uncomfortable,” they explained. “The more I understood myself and affirmed my true identity, the more difficult it became to go to church as someone else.” They began wearing trousers and t-shirts to church on Sundays, but made an effort to choose styles that suited the formal atmosphere. It wasn’t long before they felt pushback, however. Jude served on the church’s Youth Committee, and one day after church a message appeared in the group’s WhatsApp feed, Jude recalled. It read:

> Seeing as we are youth leaders, could we make an effort to come to church dressed appropriately? I noticed someone wearing trousers in church today.

Jude knew instantly that the message referred to them and was upset because they’d made a particular effort to dress “appropriately.” “My trousers were not tight, my knees and shoulders were covered, and I was wearing a loose-fitting t-shirt,” Jude remembered. So they responded to inquire in what way their clothes were considered inappropriate. “Someone told me that the

Bible says it's 'despicable' for a woman to wear a man's clothes—I think it's somewhere in Deuteronomy," Jude recalled. They found this answer perplexing, both in terms of biblical history and the way in which Old Testament law is engaged with selectively. "Back in the time of the Bible they used to wear robes—men had robes and women also wore robes! My trousers are unisex and *I* bought them, they didn't belong to a man before me. So how can you tell me I'm wearing a man's clothes?!," Jude asked. But the issue became a constant sticking point. If Jude won the argument with one church member, another person would make a comment about how much nicer they would look in a dress or glance critically at their attire.

While finding oneself ensnared in these dynamics was distressing and frustrating, the sense of spiritual emptiness Awande articulated in the opening to this chapter was often an even more significant a factor motivating people's departures from mainline congregations. By invoking the sense of *spiritual* emptiness, Awande introduced an important distinction that many young people in Bulawayo made between the English-language terms "religion" and "spirituality."[2] Young Zimbabweans often describe mainline churches as characterized by religious styles of worship, oriented around rules, hierarchical authority, and collective rituals. In contrast, they view spiritual practices as those that allow more latitude for self-expression and offer an unmediated relationship with God. Awande conveyed this sentiment when she said of the Catholic Church, "It's really just ritual. Each week there are specific Bible scriptures, and whether you're in Brazil or Italy or Zimbabwe everyone knows on that day we will read this scripture." She went on to make the distinction even more explicit: "People in the Catholic Church focus a lot on religion and doctrine without really focusing on the spiritual." She continued, "Being in church was more of a social activity—it was religious, but I can't say it had

[2] Most people employ the English-language words to make a semantic differentiation that is not as easy to express in Ndebele.

deep, deep spiritual affirmations for me." Likewise, Malachi, a young gay man raised Seventh Day Adventist, observed this distinction in different styles of worship and prayer. "In the Adventist church, you're only able to pray from your heart," he said, referring to silent prayer led by the priest during which congregants close their eyes and bow their heads. "One person stands up—an elder or pastor—and gives the opening prayer. While he's praying you have to pray in your heart; you don't get a chance to pray on your own and express yourself," he told me. Ultimately, Malachi found the environment of the Adventist congregation to be too "religious," and craved a more spiritual outlet in which he could express himself directly to God.

The distinction Awande, Malachi, and other interlocutors make between religious and spiritual forms of worship reflects a consequential development in the history of Christianity, the effects of which have been felt in religious life around the world. Positing religion and spirituality as two contrasting forms of religious practice traces its roots to Protestant arguments about legitimate and desirable forms of religiosity. During the Reformation, debates centered on the question of whether Christian religiosity ought to be oriented towards exteriorized "works" such as sacraments and saintly devotion, as in the Catholic tradition, or an interiorized "faith" in Christ, as Protestant reformers advocated (Massing, 2018).[3] This distinction took on added significance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the colonial encounter with non-Christian others and emergence of "religion" as a universal category (Asad, 1993). Figures like the anthropologist James Frazer (1890) developed typologies of religion and placed them on a linear evolutionary scale. In his scheme, Frazer outlined what he termed "low" or "natural"

[3] This distinction was central to Luther's interpretation of the Bible. Luther drew on debates in the early church about the place of Old Testament law to reject many of the devotional practices of the Catholic Church, like paying indulgences and the reverence of sacred relics. Instead, Luther prioritized faith in Christ, arguing that Christians can be "justified" (that is, achieve salvation) by faith alone. He rejected the role of any kind of "good works" in the pursuit of salvation, thereby shifting the emphasis of Christian religiosity away from external works and instead emphasizing the cultivation of an interiorized faith.

religions, which he associated with practices like animism, totemism, shamanism, and ancestor worship. These were used to describe religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa and other places on the bottom rung of Frazer's evolutionary scale (J. Z. Smith, 1998). According to his typology, these "natural" religions were characterized by their orientation towards collective rules, rituals, and practices; that is, "religious" forms of devotion. In contrast, "high" religions were considered to be more sophisticated, rational, and closer to the scientific modes of reasoning Frazer admired. These traditions—which were epitomized by Protestant Christianity—foregrounded the mind, the individual, and interiorized reflection, things that were increasingly viewed as archetypal markers of a "spiritual" orientation.

The discourses that equate interiority and unmediated access to the divine with greater sophistication laid the groundwork for the radical changes in religious practice that occurred in the twentieth century. Particularly in the West, the growing valorization of the individual and unmediated spiritual experience increasingly led people away from formal religious congregations. Institutional religious participation declined precipitously and increasing numbers of people set out on "spiritual journeys" in which they integrated a range of ideas and practices into their own personal metaphysical schemes (Roof, 1993).[4] The religious landscape in America and other Western countries came to be a "spiritual marketplace" in which myriad ideas and practices jockeyed for influence. Moreover, the practices and ideas that this new generation of spiritual seekers emphasized centered on the individual and interiority in religious practice, and

[4] Narratives about the inevitable and linear move of congregants away from religious settings towards more spiritual arenas mirror discourses about secularization, albeit with less certainty about the demise of religious practice. Foundational works by Émile Durkheim (2014) and Max Weber (2002) articulated the secularization thesis, a story in which the erosion of traditional communities resulted in increasingly privatized religious practice and the disenchantment of the world. Thomas Luckmann (1967) nuanced this account by describing contemporary religion as increasingly a matter of private and individual concern. Scholars like Talal Asad (2003) and Charles Taylor (2007) challenged the linearity and inevitability of these accounts of secularization, arguing that that the theory is based on universalizing Western experiences and unjustified assumptions about the triumph of "rational" modes of knowing the world.

shying from rituals of uniformity. In the wake of these developments, the denominations associated with the terms religion and spirituality shifted significantly. Traditions that once epitomized "spirituality," like mainline Protestantism, succumbed to the label of "religion" and its negative connotations. At the same time, those traditions considered to be preeminently "spiritual" also evolved, and today newer forms of Protestantism, Buddhism, and the New Age are all commonly described as more "spiritual" than religious (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Tacey, 2004). As we shall see in the next section, while the forces that shaped religious practice in Southern Africa in the twentieth century were distinct from those in Western countries, the impact of the growing salience of "spiritual" desires was nonetheless felt.

When Awande, Malachi, and other interlocutors use the terms religion and spirituality, they implicitly draw upon these discursive genealogies and associations between spirituality and ideas about modernity, individualism, and sophistication. Yet while my interlocutors frequently deploy this semantic distinction, their practices can serve to complicate it. As we shall see, they often draw on paradigmatically "spiritual" orientations—like an unmediated or self-determined relationship with God—to engage with and reinvent ancestral practices, once the archetypal site of "religion." Although the distinction is discursively significant to my interlocutors, then, it doesn't always entail a linear trajectory away from the old and towards the new. Indeed, can inject new ways of experiencing the self and the otherworldly into ancestral traditions. In order to appreciate exactly how Pentecostalism came to offer young Zimbabweans more "spiritual" forms of worship, it is necessary to explore the history of Pentecostalism and the new imagination of God it introduced to Southern Africa.

Pentecostal Histories

Pentecostalism has saturated accounts of religion in Africa over the past three decades (Asamoah-Gyadu, 1998; Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Daswani, 2015; Englund, 2007; Haynes, 2017; Kalu, 2008; Meyer, 2004; Togarasei, 2016). Although the Pentecostal movement arrived in Southern Africa in the early twentieth century, ethnographic studies of Pentecostalism proliferated in the 1990s. During this period, Pentecostal churches grew exponentially, especially among young and urban people grappling with the failures of postcolonial development. These new forms of Pentecostalism caught the attention of scholars of religion for their hostility to aspects of African cultures that Euro-American anthropologists had long seen as their domain, notably the veneration of ancestors and other "traditional" social institutions like kinship networks and life-stage rituals (Burchardt, 2014; Chitando, 2007; Dube, 2018; Pype, 2016). While much of the literature on Pentecostalism focuses on the hostility of these churches to "tradition," scholars paid less attention to a new model of the Christian deity that these churches borrowed from American evangelicalism. In contrast to the stern, distant patriarch of nineteenth century mission churches, the Pentecostal explosion ushered in a new understanding of God, one that is essential to understanding its appeal among young queer people. In this section, I describe the history of Pentecostalism and unpack how more recent variants mark a radical shift in how young people approach religious life.

The story of Pentecostalism begins in the late nineteenth century United States. At a time when churches were deeply segregated and Black and white Americans rarely worshipped together, the movement was radical in fusing aspects of African American and white southern Christianity to foster innovative forms of spiritual experience (Cox, 1995). Its founder, a Black preacher named William Joseph Seymour, was born in Louisiana in 1870 and grew up in African

American churches in which ecstatic styles of prayer and visceral experiences of being possessed by the Holy Spirit were common. While unpicking the roots of African American Christianities is complex, scholars have noted the ways in which characteristically African styles of religiosity—such as aural aesthetics and spirit possession—manifest in both creole religions of the Americas and various Christian traditions of the African diaspora (Crawley, 2017; Gill, 2018b; Hollenweger, 1969).[5] Seymour eventually found his way to Los Angeles and on April 9th 1906, he and his followers found themselves filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues.[6] Within days of this first "outpouring of the Spirit," Seymour and his followers moved to an empty warehouse on Azusa Street, marking the birth of a new revival. By the end of the year missionaries had begun to seed these "charismatic" encounters with the Holy Spirit across the breadth of the United States and further afield. This new strand of Christianity reached Southern Africa in 1908, just two years after the Azusa Street Revival, by which time its missionaries from had reached fifty countries and sparked hundreds of local revivals (A. H. Anderson, 2007).

As we saw in the previous chapter, by the first decade of the twentieth century Christianity already had considerable influence in Southern Africa, as missionaries were often the first colonial figures to arrive in lands that would later become South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. Characteristic forms of Pentecostal worship, such as prophecy, healing, and ecstatic

[5] Seymour led an itinerant life in adulthood and eventually encountered the white preacher Charles Fox Parnham, who introduced him to the ideas of the Holiness movement that was sweeping the Southern United States (Fox, 2012). Holiness preachers emphasized the presence of Christ within every believer and viewed fervent prayer—especially speaking in tongues—as a crucial sign of the imminence of the End Times (Synan, 1997).

[6] The significance of speaking in tongues stems from a story told in The Acts of the Apostles (2: 20), the fifth book of the New Testament, which narrates the moment when Jesus's followers gathered in Jerusalem on the day of the Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus's crucifixion. There, they experienced a collective encounter with the Holy Spirit, which filled their bodies and enabled them to speak in languages they did not know. In his commentary, the apostle Peter explains that this was the fulfilment of ancient prophecy that described the outpouring of the Spirit as an unmistakable sign of the Last Days. The prophecy, found in the Book of Joel (2: 28), also cites visions, vivid dreams, and prophesying as other key signs of the "the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."

prayer, had affinities with precolonial Southern African worship, and were quickly taken up by independent churches. Yet because the Pentecostal missionaries who brought the Azusa Street Revival to Southern Africa were white, the ways in which Pentecostalism was grounded in Black diasporic religious styles was often obscured or denied. This gave rise to at least two strains of Pentecostal Christianity in Southern Africa. On the one hand were classical Pentecostal churches, typified by congregations like the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and Assemblies of God (AOG), which were founded by white missionaries with connections to Azusa Street and would become institutionalized, transnational movements. On the other hand were more diffuse African-Initiated Churches (AICs), which were heavily influenced by Pentecostal ideas about the Holy Spirit and founded by Black prophets who emphasized commonalities with ancestral spiritual practices (A. H. Anderson, 2019).

These ostensibly new forms of religious expression had clear affinities with precolonial Southern African styles of healing, prophecy, and spirit possession (Chandomba, 2007), particularly AICs that overtly incorporated aspects of indigenous religion, such as dreaming and consulting with ancestral spirits (Comaroff, 1985; Fields, 1985). From the beginning, AICs were associated with people of a lower social class who didn't have access to the forms of education and social capital that facilitated access to historically white-led classical Pentecostal churches. Moreover, the AICs were perceived to be closer to "traditional" ways of life and still bear the stigma of being lower class and socially regressive today (Engelke, 2007). Classical Pentecostal churches like AFM, AOG, and their offshoots, on the other hand, have always positioned themselves as middle class reformist movements, modernizing religious practices and doing away with ancestral practices (Maxwell, 1995). Despite this divergence, both classical Pentecostal churches and AICs grew and spread rapidly during the first half of the 20th century,

with missionaries, itinerant evangelists, and migrant laborers and traders carrying the new style of worship to Zimbabwe by the mid-1910s (Kalu, 2008). In the Zimbabwean context today, the two strands are seen as distinct Christian traditions, and the term "Pentecostal" is typically only used to refer to classical Pentecostal churches, whereas AICs are described as "apostolic" or "Zion" churches, and the class associations of the two branches persist.[7]

The split between classical Pentecostal churches and AICs deepened in the mid-20th century with the advent of neo-Pentecostal movements that injected new dynamics into African Christianity, ultimately giving rise to a third brand of Pentecostalism in the region. Such movements drew on developments in evangelical Christianity in the United States, such as prosperity theology, televangelism, and a renewed interest in demons (K. Bowler, 2018; Synan, 1997), often taking the form of prophetic "ministries" whose figureheads became celebrities in their own right, such as Nigeria's T.B. Joshua and Zimbabwe's Emmanuel Makandiwa (Togarasei, 2016). From the 1960s onwards, Pentecostals in the United States joined forces with evangelicals and fundamentalists to develop a more politicized Christianity. This was in part a reaction against the social changes embodied in the civil rights, women's, and gay liberation movements, and gave rise to renewed concern for "family values," sexual morality, and rigid readings of biblical law (Gifford, 1988; McAlister, 2018). Neo-Pentecostal churches were instrumental in importing certain idioms of this social conservatism to Africa (Burchardt, 2014; Van Dijk, 1992), and by the 1990s played a role in fostering the increasing prevalence of homophobic discourses on the continent (Homewood, 2016b; Van Klinken, 2014). Broadly, though, neo-Pentecostal churches focused their efforts on shoring up boundaries between true

[7] Although a small number of my interlocutors participate in AICs, like many other young urban Zimbabweans they don't find them particularly appealing. Elders predominate in AICs and they remain wedded to aspects of ancestral spirituality that my interlocutors depart from, as we will see in later chapters.

Christians and various perceived "others"—traditional healers, lax mainline Christians, and those deemed otherwise immoral—with conversion framed as a "rupture" between traditional and modern lifeways (Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2007).

A significant yet less visible innovation of neo-Pentecostal churches was their emphasis on developing a personal relationship with God, an idea that can be traced to other changes in mid-twentieth century American religious practice. Perhaps surprisingly given the conservatism for which evangelicalism is known, this innovation originated in postwar hippy movements. The counterculture of the 1960s gave rise to a generation of "spiritual seekers" who advanced a new vision of God (Roof, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998). The churches they established imagined Jesus as a social revolutionary who loved and embraced all, and they sought to inject informality and playfulness into worship. Whereas established churches often insisted that congregants arrive in their Sunday best, counterculture Christians encouraged people to dress casually. Likewise, they replaced choirs and hymns with folk music and rock bands. Just as significantly, they began to speak about God in personal, friendly, and intimate terms. In nineteenth century Christianity, God was often portrayed as a stern and distant patriarch who sought to impose rigid moral and social uniformity. In contrast, the God of the counterculture was, in the words of Tanya Luhrmann, "a deeply human, even vulnerable God who loves us unconditionally and wants nothing more than to be our friend, our best friend" (2012, p. 35). This vision of a God that foregrounded love and friendship over discipline and judgement quickly spread through evangelical churches across America. In the decades after the 1960s, it was gradually taken up by socially conservative denominations that had viewed the counterculture in antagonistic terms. The neo-Pentecostal churches that spread across Africa in the late twentieth century incorporated many of the innovations of American evangelicalism, including its idiom of a personal God.

Among younger Zimbabweans, I suggest, perhaps the greatest appeal of Pentecostalism is the notion of a personal God and its affordances for cultivating idiosyncratic spiritual trajectories. While this entails a more individualistic model of religious practice—in some senses a "rupture" with older models—it also undermines the authority of pastors as essential mediators in people's relationship with God. As such, Pentecostalism may unexpectedly lay the groundwork for a return to and reimagination of ancestral traditions.

The Lure of Pentecostalism

"At that time, my spiritual life was…," Awande said, trailing off. "I was spiritually dead," she explained bluntly. Awande, who we met in the introduction to this chapter, left high school when Zimbabwe reached the peak of its hyperinflationary crisis in 2009. During that time, the Catholic Church continued to have a prominent place in her life. She was stuck at home and unoccupied for the first year after school and passed her time volunteering for various programs run by the church, teaching catechism lessons and cooking in church-run soup kitchens. Eventually, she got a job with an NGO that specialized in sexual and reproductive health and became acquainted with activists and development workers, and began to discover Bulawayo's queer rights organizations in the process. "That's how I came into the community," she said, referring to queer networks in the city. Through these organizations, she began to develop a fuller sense of herself. "I really owe my understanding of my own sexuality to people like Jude, who I met then. It was people like them who explained SOGIE and all that to me," Awande said, invoking an acronym that stands for "sexual orientation, gender identity and expression," which is often used as a shorthand in queer spaces. "It was all new to me! And it took me time—maybe about a year—to consolidate and really figure out where I placed myself. Now I tick "Q" for

queer, because I don't think I'm really a lesbian, but I am gender non-conforming. I just know I'm not straight," she explained.

When Awande was twenty-five had a brief relationship with a man with the aim of getting pregnant, who she now refers to as her "sperm donor." Her brother had died suddenly not long before and, in her words, "The lesson was—don't die and just let people forget you—leave a legacy. I didn't want to die and not have any children behind me." But the pregnancy turned out to also mark something of a turning point in her spiritual outlook. "When I was pregnant I was too tired to go to church, but when I tried going back afterwards it made me feel so… empty. The priest was good with pastoral work—he was working in the prisons—but what I needed was something spiritual," Awande recalled. Departing from her Catholic childhood wasn't easy, however. "I prayed a lot before going to a Pentecostal church. Coming from a Catholic background I was nervous about the Pentecostal world. They're ministry style churches," she explained, referring to a congregation that revolves around a single prophet. "I'm used to the church being for the people, about helping the poor, and I was scared about the emphasis they put on tithes—like, give us your last money and then someone goes and buys a car with it." Here, Awande articulated a critique of a distinctive aspect of neo-Pentecostalism—the prosperity gospel—which distinguishes it from mainline denominations and has been a major theme in studies of Pentecostalism in Africa (Lyonga, 2016; Maxwell, 1998). While all churches encourage tithing in some form, prosperity congregations teach that giving to the church has a direct relationship to the receipt of divine blessings (K. Bowler, 2018). Pastors often preach that the more a parishioner tithes the more rewards they will receive in the form of health and wealth. Awande's critical perspective on prosperity theology was common among my interlocutors. Jude, who we met earlier and was also raised Catholic, also echoed this sentiment. "The gospel

of 'I'll make money, money, money'—it really seems so removed from what a relationship with God should be about, you know?," they said. "Those pastors only care about prospering themselves—they don't care if others suffer." These kinds of concerns about ministry-style churches and the prosperity gospel made Awande hesitant about going to a Pentecostal church. "Coming from a Catholic background—that Pentecostal ideology was very alien to me," she admitted.

Faced with these uncertainties, Awande prayed about what to do and waited for a sign of divine guidance. "Eventually I was invited to go to the same church by three different people in a week—to me, that's God speaking," she said. The Pentecostal church she found was in the heart of Bulawayo, not far from the packed bars that host the city's gay scene on weekends, situated in an empty room above a hardware store with no signage and a congregation of under fifty. "It was a new church, a humble church," she remembered. Its prophetess, as the pastor styled herself, was a woman who in a previous life had spent her weekends drinking, a past that resonated with Awande. In contrast to the difficulties many queer people face with the policing of gender expression in mainline churches, the atmosphere felt less constricting to Awande. She could arrive at a late-night prayer service after drinking with friends wearing informal clothes, and nobody would comment on her appearance. "I would go there in my shorts and t-shirts—at that church I was home," Awande remembered. The experience of being free to dress as you please was often one of the first things queer people notice about Pentecostal churches in contrast to mainline denominations. Mudiwa, for instance, was raised Seventh Day Adventist and also struggled with the kinds of attempts to police gender expression that Awande and Jude described. "In the SDA church, when I got a piercing everyone was like, 'The devil is using you!,"' she laughed. "So when I decided to stop going to SDA, I was like, 'Let me find another

church that I can go to and not feel judged,'" Mudiwa remembered. "So I tried a Pentecostal church, and it was so different to SDA," she went on. "Clothes-wise you were allowed to wear whatever you want. I actually went with some friends who are transmen and the church people were like, 'Oh, you can come like that!'" For both Awande and Mudiwa, less restrictive attitudes towards attire made the transition to Pentecostalism both appealing and smooth.

From Awande's perspective, the structure of services in Pentecostal churches were more free-flowing, guided by the Holy Spirit instead of the rituals of the church. Lindiwe, who we met at the opening of the dissertation, first ventured into Pentecostal churches as a teenager. She captured this distinction when she recalled how captivated she was the first time she encountered Pentecostal worship. Having spent her childhood in repetitive Salvation Army services with her mother and reluctantly attended weekly Sunday School, Lindiwe and her sister were invited by a friend to a Pentecostal church located in the center of Bulawayo, a twenty-minute bus ride away from their home. "It was different from a traditional church," Lindiwe recalled, using the term "traditional" to refer to a mainline congregation. "You get there and you dance—you're literally free to do whatever," she explained. "There's no set order like in a traditional church—things change from week to week." The church even had a braai—or barbecue—after the service, something that rarely occurred at the Salvation Army, and the following week she and her sister were keen to go back. "The next week we went again and they had a braai again, and we were like, 'Wow, this is a cool church!' We definitely wanted to keep going." The relaxed atmosphere made Lindiwe feel at home at church. "I actually understood why I was at church for the first time in my life," Lindiwe recalled. But she and her sister's desire to attend this new church caused friction with their mother. "We had several fights with my Mum. With the Salvation Army we could walk to church," she said. "But with our new church we needed to take ETs into

town and then walk to church from there," she said, referring to the minibuses that form Bulawayo's informal public transport network and cost about a dollar to ride in each direction. "Mum was like, 'Your church is expensive!' But we persuaded her to allow us to keep going, because we really loved that church."

At Awande's new church, everyone was encouraged to pray directly to God, in their own voice and style, rather than being led by the priest, reflecting the Pentecostal orientation towards prayer. Ecstatic forms of prayer—most notably speaking in tongues—are one of the most distinctive features of Pentecostalism. But in many younger churches in Bulawayo, tongue-speaking is increasingly the province of older congregants, a practice that seems anachronistic and embarrassing to young people. Prayer still involves intensely personal encounters with the God, however. The significance of this experience is captured by Malachi, who described his frustrations with "praying from the heart" above. When he began going to a Pentecostal church, he found the style of prayer more sustaining than in his Adventist congregation. "When it comes to praying in the Pentecostal church, you pray on your own. It's so spiritual and it helps you express your emotions." Prayer in Pentecostal churches is a time to commune directly with God, often speaking out loud and sharing experiences with Him without the direct mediation of the pastor. For many, these encounters are profoundly moving. "You see some people end up crying while praying," Malachi told me. He found that he was able to take his own dilemmas to church and process them through these kinds of acts of prayer. "When there's something that's bothering you, you're able to pray about it personally. I would feel like God had answered my prayers—released all of that stress," he said. "I would leave church feeling free."

Likewise, many of my interlocutors emphasized that the sermons and preaching in Pentecostal churches spoke more readily to their experiences. The sermons of the prophetess at

Awande's church were inspiring. She spoke candidly and without judgement about topics like forgiveness, healing the body and soul, and issues affecting women. The church didn't need signs, Awande said, because, "That lady marketed herself through her teachings—she was just led by the Spirit." The prophetess's relatable style made Awande feel able to ask direct questions about spirituality she'd never felt able to utter in a Catholic setting. "I would ask things like, 'When you say you hear God speaking, what do you mean?,'" Awande remembered. The prophetess responded that she could hear God speaking as if he was whispering in her ear. "I've still never had that experience," Awande admitted. "But maybe I need to clean my ears," she joked. Awande could directly engage in discussions about what it meant to have a personal relationship with God and an individual sense of her own spirituality in a way that was rarely possible in the Catholic church, where discussions were oriented around sacraments, scripture, and strove for uniformity. The notion that preaching in Pentecostal churches is more relevant to the dilemmas of young people was common among my interlocutors. Bongani, for instance, described the preaching at his church as, "Much closer to reality than just clustered on the Bible. They're things you can actually add to your life." Bongani was a university student who was raised in the Apostolic Faith Mission, the oldest Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe that was established in the early twentieth century. Because of its longevity, Bongani found it was dominated by elders and deeply conservative, which led him to seek out a new church near his university campus. Speaking of his new church, he said, "The preachings there are *amazing*. The content is about guidance and leadership. It's things you can value—it's so relevant," he told me. "It's like we're trying to explore Christianity in practice as opposed to rules, rules, rules."

Taken together, these distinctive approaches to dress, the format of services, prayer, and preaching all made Pentecostal churches feel more "spiritual" than their mainline counterparts.

Pentecostal innovations created a marketplace of churches in which people can search for a congregation that speaks to their individual dilemmas and desires. For young queer people, this can be vital to finding a place they feel at home and spiritually sustained. Speaking of the Pentecostal church run by the prophetess, Awande said, "That place was very crucial for me, spiritually." Before long, this one church had a fairly large contingent of queer people and sex workers attending its services, and people at the church began referring to Awande as an "evangelist." "I didn't know what that word meant, but they explained that I'm one of those people who brings people to God. I was even bringing in sex workers, and they'd never had people like that before." The church became a kind of refuge for Awande. "That church was home," she remembered. "Every Friday I would be there for all-night prayers, and somehow it became a safe space for me and the community members," she recalled. But given the Pentecostal world's notoriety for vocal homophobia, the emergence of points of tension were inevitable, as Awande soon discovered.

Homophobia and Prophetic Ministries

"We were young people and we had this fire for God," Reggie said passionately, speaking of his teenage years in a Pentecostal congregation. Reggie is 35-years-old, an employee of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) in Bulawayo, and still considered himself "more spiritual than most." Whenever we rode together in his car, he played gospel music at full blast and told me he often found himself in prayer while driving. He was raised in the Methodist church in Kwekwe, a city halfway between Bulawayo and Harare, but at the age of 15 began participating in the Scriptural Union, an interdenominational school club where young people gather to read the Bible and pray together. It was there that he first encountered people who went to charismatic

churches and found himself drawn in by the way they spoke about God. Soon, he began attending a Pentecostal church himself, where he and other young members of the church developed a "fire for God," a passion that stayed with him into adulthood. When he left school at eighteen, he moved to the city of Chinhoyi in northern Zimbabwe to begin a degree in mechanical engineering. In Chinhoyi, Reggie found accommodation with a Pentecostal pastor, and when he began to struggle with his degree program he decided to drop out and switch to Bible School. Alongside his new seminary studies, he began serving as a junior pastor in his church and soon spent almost all of his waking hours working for and ministering in the church. At that age, he recalled, he felt an unwavering sense of being called to a life of ministry and church service.

The further Reggie progressed with his training as a pastor, however, the more he began to feel his sexuality was coming into conflict with his vocation. "If there was a thing I prayed for hardest, it was for the gay thing to go," Reggie said of that time. "It felt like my daily life was fighting against sin, fighting evil, fighting carnality," he said emotionally. "And when I had relationships with men, I'd feel like I was drifting away from God," he explained, recalling that he would frequently fast and pray in the hope of changing his desires. But while in Chinhoyi, he met his first boyfriend. "He was this cute guy and we clicked the moment we met. Not long after that he proposed that we date and I said yes," Reggie remembered. As they were both members of the same church their relationship became a rollercoaster as they each grappled with the questions the church's teachings posed for them. After several months, Reggie's boyfriend confessed about their relationship to their pastor. The pastor responded, "I know how we can deal with this—it's spiritual. We just need to pray against these spirits," Reggie remembered. The pastor framed same-sex desires as a form of demonic possession, a notion that's common in

Pentecostal churches (Hackman, 2018; Homewood, 2016a; Richman, 2021; Van Klinken, 2019). Once again Reggie tried prayer, as he had many times before, but it left him feeling increasingly adrift. “My sexuality was in me,” he said, “I was embracing the teachings of the Word and struggling very deeply with the two,” he recalled. Eventually, he felt he was left with no choice but to leave the church. “I told my pastor I was resigning because I couldn’t reconcile the expectations of my role as pastor and who I really was,” Reggie explained. “I was struggling with fighting it, and it seemed like I was constantly failing.”

After leaving the church in Chinhoyi, Reggie switched paths of study for a third time, moving to the city of Masvingo in south-eastern Zimbabwe to begin a science degree, a qualification that eventually made him a strong candidate to be offered a fulltime position at GALZ in Bulawayo. When he moved to the city, he looked for a Pentecostal church that would resonate with his religious background, hoping that being in a larger city would make things easier. “The church I really wanted to go to was Harvest House,” Reggie said, referring to the largest Pentecostal denomination in Bulawayo, with ten locations throughout the city, a main auditorium with a capacity of 10,000, and over 700 congregations internationally. “It’s a church I felt I could really relate to,” he explained, since it reminded him of the things he liked about his old church in Chinhoyi. When he first moved to the city five years previously he began dropping into services at Harvest House. Less than a year after he began attending, however, his worst fears resurfaced. “There was a day when I went and the pastor began to preach about gays, castigating them, and the things he said… It was awful,” Reggie remembered. “As soon as he finished that statement I walked out of the church. I’m here working in human rights and for me to sit in such a space and listen to that—it’s just toxic,” he said. Since then, despite feeling a deep craving for a congregational home, he hadn’t been to church consistently.

It is this kind of incident that makes many young queer Zimbabweans apprehensive about attending Pentecostal churches, nervous that in spite of an atmosphere that otherwise feels welcoming they might encounter explicitly homophobic preaching. Unlike in mainline congregations, where dress becomes a recurrent issue, in Pentecostal churches same-sex relationships are much more frequently and explicitly discussed. Other interlocutors describe being told by Pentecostal pastors to stop attending church when their sexuality was discovered or having it become a recurrent topic of discussion among church leaders. Danny, who spoke about having sermons directed at him in the introduction, had just such an experience in his family's Pentecostal church. "Our pastor would come to our house for Home Group on Wednesdays," he said, referring to an informal weekly gathering intended to be a space to discuss scripture. "He would open the Bible and begin reciting a verse about homosexuality. Sometimes Leviticus 18,[8] other times Sodom and Gomorrah," Danny remembered. "That pastor would always emphasize, 'God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.'" Eventually, Danny decided to confront the pastor, asking him, "Why do you always talk about me? Aren't you supposed to be teaching people about the Bible?" The pastor denied that the sermons and preaching had anything to do with Danny, but he was certain that the underlying message had always been directed at him. From then on, Danny drifted away from the church.

"Pentecostals are very expressive about sexual morality," Sandile agreed, the Anglican priest we met earlier. "To be honest I think they're hypocrites!," he said. "Certain Pentecostal churches will be very vocal on sexual morality, but the pastor will be dating half the church," he joked. While Sandile's comments were humorous in nature, they revealed a common critique of

[8] Leviticus 18 mostly focuses on incest, but also describes menstrual taboos, bestiality, and male same-sex intimacies. Written as if directed to an imagined male listener, the text reads, "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman."

Pentecostal pastors for wielding too much power as self-styled "prophets" (Dube, 2018). Among young people in Bulawayo, rumors about Pentecostal leaders exploiting their status to begin relationships with congregants were rife, often suggesting that pastors justified these relationships on spurious theological grounds, for instance by claiming they could cure infertility or same-sex desires. Because Pentecostal churches are often ministries organized around a singular figurehead, individual pastors can come to wield considerable power and influence over the congregation. Among those from mainline backgrounds, it was common to hear critiques of Pentecostal churchgoers for "worshipping their pastor." Jude also found the prophetic nature of Pentecostal churches off-putting. "There are so many fake prophets out there that it's hard for me to believe all of them are real," Jude said. "And some of them use their power to abuse their members—you often hear of these pastors sleeping with their flock, it's terrible." This dynamic can compound the exclusion that homophobic sermons generate. Whereas in mainline denominations comments about gender transgression come from a handful of elders, in Pentecostal churches the whole congregation can turn its attention toward a particular member if the pastor—or prophet—singles them out.

In fact, Jude also attended Awande's church, but never felt quite as comfortable there as she did, foreshadowing difficulties Awande would later encounter. At the first service Jude went to, they recalled, "They said to us, 'All the new people must come to the front to be prayed for.' So we went to the front and had to kneel down, and the prophetess came and placed her hands over our heads." Jude felt apprehensive, uncertain about what was going to happen. "The whole time my heart was beating, like, 'Oh my God, what's she going to say about me?' She began with one of our friends and said something about her having the "spirit of a man" or something like that. And then she came to me and just said, 'Same story!,'" Jude laughed. This interaction

was not what Jude had feared, however. “She didn’t say it out loud for everyone to hear—she said it quietly and kept it between us. To me that’s surprising, because these prophets normally want these things to be proclaimed to the whole congregation.” Jude’s experience demonstrates that despite the relaxed dress code, concerns about gender and sexuality are certainly not absent in Pentecostal spaces (Bochow & Van Dijk, 2012; Eriksen, 2014; Pfeiffer et al., 2007; Pype, 2016). It also illustrates that an emphasis on the prophetic presence of one individual can determine whether or not gender transgression or sex-same desires become topics of discourse and concern in a given congregation.

For Awande, the ostensible openness to gender non-conformity in Pentecostal spaces would also eventually break down. The prophetess at her church was originally from Tanzania, and several months after Awande met her she lost her Zimbabwean residency permit and had to leave the country. Awande then moved to a church run by a friend of the prophetess, but the new congregation was less comfortable. “I believed I was home—I assumed it was my safe space—so I would go there in my shorts and t-shirts like before,” she remembered. But conversations about clothing and gender resurfaced. One day, her new pastor mentioned that she should come to church in dresses, which Awande said she would try. “I wore a dress once, but I didn’t feel comfortable so it didn’t wear it again,” she explained. Other congregants suggested she go to the pastor for counselling to navigate these “personal issues.” Here, Awande found her initial concerns about a ministry-style church justified. “I’m not one of these people who follows men and women of God,” Awande explained, signaling her critique of the prophetic orientation of Pentecostal churches. In the end, dynamics surrounding pastoral authority pushed Awande out of this new church. “It made me feel like I was a misfit—like I’m not wanted and not liked. So I exited the WhatsApp group and stopped going,” she remembered. In these experiences, Awande

and Jude were not necessarily alienated from Pentecostalism by overt homophobia, but rather found that a ministry organized around a single figure left them at the mercy of one individual, someone could call into question their relationship with God.

Many of my interlocutors were deeply critical of these attitudes, not only because they were personally harmful but also because they perceived them to be theologically inconsistent. A central critique was that by focusing so explicitly on same-sex intimacies, Pentecostal churches singled out certain sins for particular censure. Malachi, who spoke about being drawn to the expressive styles of prayer in Pentecostal churches above, described his confusion about the topic. "I've always wanted to be spiritually on the right side," he said. "But over time I went to different churches and heard different kinds of preaching. Sometimes they would tell you, 'Homosexuality is blasphemy, it's the greatest sin.' But then you'd go to another church and they'd tell you, 'There is no sin that is greater than another.'" This latter concept, the teaching that no sin is greater than another, is something that many of my interlocutors invoked. Mudiwa, who we met earlier, echoed this sentiment. "I don't steal, I don't hurt people—I only fall in love with people that love me," she said with exasperation. "Some of the people I'm friends with engage in sex before marriage, which is said to be wrong by the church. But the message always seemed to be *your* sin is worse than mine," she remembered. Mudiwa went on, "I'm like, 'What criteria are we using to judge?' Because no sin is bigger than the other; at least that's what the Bible says. So why are you judging me?" This critique was common, with many young queer people taking issue with the way in which Pentecostal churches foregrounded scriptures about same-sex intimacies over others, and often singling out queer members of their congregations in the process.

As Reggie, Jude, and Awande's experiences reveal, Pentecostal churches are often conflicted spaces for queer people: spiritually captivating and in some ways more welcoming than their mainline counterparts, yet rarely able to offer total comfort due to the anxiety that explicit homophobia will surface. In order to overcome these tensions, many young queer people draw on an idea that is frequently articulated in Pentecostal spaces: the encouragement to develop a personal and unmediated relationship with God. This idea, as we shall see, enables them to develop a fuller sense of their own spiritual agency and theological capacities away from congregational life. While many ultimately stray from congregational Pentecostalism, they often remain inspired by its orientation towards God.

Cultivating Discernment

"The one time I go to church these days is Adoration," Jude said, speaking of a type of silent and meditative afternoon services distinctive to the Catholic Church. Working for a sexual rights organization in the center of town, Jude often excused themselves in the late afternoon and go to church for an hour of silent prayer. Frequently, they found a space on an empty wooden pew with no more than ten other people under the high arches of the cathedral ceiling. "Each person there is focused on their moment of prayer and their moment of connection," Jude said. "It makes me feel… It's a very spiritual closeness. I always feel like I can talk directly to God," they explained. Jude told me that although they haven't been to a Catholic Mass for years, they felt that Adoration allowed them time and space to cultivate a personal relationship with God. "I'm free to say to God whatever I'm thinking and feeling, and ask whatever I want to ask. I go home feeling much better and much lighter," they explained. "And at that time no one is focused on anyone but themselves, so I can show up dressed however I want."

Over years of experiencing frustrations in both Catholic and Pentecostal churches—the former for constantly policing gender expression, the latter for the outsized presence of prophetic figures—Jude began cultivating their own sense of spirituality. At the heart of this was focusing on cultivating a personal relationship with God, one that was strong enough to guide them forward while leaving them free from the strictures of an institution or the judgement of fellow parishioners. "Just the whole idea of an institution organizing how you're supposed to think seems a bit off to me," Jude said. "Yes, Pentecostal churches are talking about the Spirit—like, listen when the Spirit speaks to you," they said. "I subscribe to the idea that there's a spirit within us—we all have a sense of what's right and wrong, an innate thing that's there even before you interact with any structures out there," they said. "But the idea of a very uniform experience of the spirit—where one person is the tongue-speaker, then the next person is the tongue-speaker—that lack of diversity is suspect to me," Jude said. Religious authority figures who attempt to structure spiritual experience accounted for many of the issues had Jude faced, ultimately impeding their ability to foster a relationship with God. Jude's skepticism developed to the point that the label "Christian" felt increasingly uncomfortable, despite their commitment to God. "I have questions about so many things," they explained. "I have questions about the origins of Christianity. It's not that I think things are without truth, but I question how much manipulation has happened over the years and how certain structures have been entrenched to benefit some people," they said.

Jude's account of drifting away from the institution of the church while remaining committed to their relationship with God reflected the experience of many of my interlocutors. In Jude's reinvention of the Adoration service, they demonstrated that embracing a "spiritual" attitude doesn't necessarily permanently direct people away from sites and practices associated

with mainline "religion." Yet these engagements are nonetheless premised on a distinctively Pentecostal understanding of God. The idiom of a God with whom it's possible to be on personal and intimate terms has wide purchase among young people in Bulawayo, frequently invoked both directly and indirectly. I encountered it in conversations with people across denominations, even when many churches—especially mainline denominations—stress the essential intermediary role of pastors, priests, and church rituals. Sandile, the Anglican priest, captured the concerns that this shift has generated among mainline church leaders. "Pentecostals imply you can boldly walk into the throne room and have a one-on-one, a tête-à-tête, with God," he said with a smile. "I certainly encourage people to have their own personal prayer life, personal faith system. You can't always have me there and inasmuch as I'm there, I'm just a channel," he explained. "But the Pentecostals *really* blew things up. A lot of young people are like, 'Hang on, maybe I don't need a priest for anything!' They no longer believe in things like the sacrament of confession, because they manifest directly to God," he said. Sandile's sentiments encapsulated the position of mainline churches on the role of priests as mediators in both interpreting scripture and developing a relationship with God.[9] Moreover, despite their propagation of the idea of a personal God, many Pentecostal prophets frame themselves as uniquely anointed to perform miraculous acts of healing, deliverance, and prophecy, and therefore strive to occupy a mediatory role of their own. But the idea of a personally available God implicitly calls into question the role of all pastors and institutions, including in Pentecostal churches.

[9] Matthew Engelke (2007) has argued that the question of mediation is a distinctive problem in Christian thought that is secondary to what he terms "the problem of presence"; that is, the tension between God's simultaneous presence and absence. In Engelke's work among Friday Apostolics in the Chitungwiza region of Zimbabwe, this question manifests in relation to the materiality of the Bible. Among my interlocutors, on the other hand, the question appears most pertinently in relation questions about to human and prophetic mediation. In other words, a central tension relates to whether other humans are better placed to receive and interpret messages from God, either in prayer or biblical hermeneutics.

Reggie, who as we saw earlier still feels a pull towards Pentecostalism, echoed Jude's apprehensions about the institution of the church. "What I still struggle with is being in church, so I try to avoid the complications of going into that space. Like, do I really need to go there and torture myself?," he asked rhetorically. But in spite of this hesitation, Reggie maintained a strong connection with God. "My central scripture is 'God loves you,'" he said. "One thing I carry with me every day is, 'God loves me, I love God'—that one is clear. I really don't want to argue with people about scripture—it's so explicit in what it's saying," he said. The idea that God offers unconditional love was perhaps the most recurrent theme in all of my interviews and conversations about people's Christian religious practice. Lwazi, a young gay man, found this helped him resolve the sense of conflict he felt around his sexuality for many years. "I had so many questions until I realized that God is love. That was everything I was after," he said. "From there I decided I can live my life, there's nothing wrong with it. I stick to my Christian moral values and principles, and above all it's love—love yourself, love God, love the people around you," he explained. Like Jude, prayer played a very central role in both Lwazi and Reggie's lives. They both prayed several times a day, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. But for the most part they did so away from pastors and other parishioners.

For young queer people who find that specific doctrines stifle their ability to feel comfortable in church, developing a relationship with God apart from the church is appealing. Bongani, the university student we met earlier when he spoke passionately about the style of preaching at his church, which mostly attracted other students and encouraged particularly broad forms of individual spiritual exploration. Because of this, he struggled to know how to describe the church. "Let's just call it non-Pentecostal," he said. "The truly Pentecostal aspect is not there—like, over-sensationalizing prayer," he explained, referring to speaking in tongues and

other forms of ecstatic prayer. But at the same time, it was not a mainline church that was established by nineteenth-century missionaries either and had more recent origins in Zimbabwe. Bongani explained that the church emphasized the need for individuals to develop their own sense of conscience, which the church described as cultivating a "spirit of discernment." The idiom of discernment appears in the book of Corinthians and is often centered in Pentecostal churches alongside other "spiritual gifts," all of which are considered to be the work of the Holy Spirit (Howard, 2000).[10] That is, it would usually be found alongside other types of charismatic worship and refer to the ability to "discern" whether a spirit is demonic or not (W. L. Anderson, 2011; Richie, 2013). But in Bongani's church, this concept was used to describe an individual guided by their relationship with God to develop a personal capacity to "discern" the meaning of texts or teachings and determine how they applied to their life. At his church, Bongani explained, parishioners were encouraged to take an analytical—almost critical—attitude towards biblical texts. "We love going deeply in the Bible and analyzing it. We take everything and discuss it and try to see how biblical analysis has changed over the years, adapted to different environments, and been recontextualized continuously," he explained. "Those are the kinds of discussions we are interested in, the things we want to discuss more," he said enthusiastically. "We don't want to be told, 'What you are doing is so, so wrong.' We're more interested in learning so we can let our own conscience judge." As he explained, "We want a situation where you're not forced *not* to drink alcohol, but you make that decision on your own based on your conscience," he told me. Indeed, Bongani was able to feel at home in this church in part because this attitude was

[10] In the biblical text, the apostle Paul describes "discernment" as one of a number of spiritual gifts, alongside prophesying, divine healing, and speaking in tongues—all of which form the foundation of distinctively Pentecostal styles of worship.

extended to same-sex intimacies. “They just encourage you to read your Bible and understand it the best way you can, and take it from there,” he said.

Although Bongani’s church was unique in such a strong emphasis on the idea of discernment, the phrase captures an approach to religious practice that many of my interlocutors shared. An attitude of discernment offers the possibility developing idiosyncratic and personal modes of reading religious texts and interpreting spiritual experiences (Bongmba & Haynes, 2022). With this knowledge, many young queer people feel emboldened to develop their spirituality by building a personal relationship with God, a relationship that ultimately transcends the authority of others. While Reggie and Malachi still craved finding a church in which they might feel truly at home, many embarked on spiritual journeys that exceeded the bounds of any one institution or denomination. And in some cases, a spirit of discernment encouraged people to look beyond the bounds of Christianity for spiritual sustenance, including to ancestral traditions their churches had vehemently warned them about.

Conclusion

“To me it’s all one spiritual realm, there are just different perspectives,” Awande explained. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Awande now thinks of herself as an apostate. As her self-designation suggests, over time she veered away from both Catholicism and Pentecostalism. “I don’t say I’m a *Christian* Christian these days, though my bearing—the one I grew up with—is Christian. I believe in prayer and fasting, and I still carry my rosary,” she said, turning it over inside the pocket of her satin bomber jacket. But her sense of having a secure relationship with God, combined with skepticism towards church institutions, opened her up to different perspectives. “I no longer put time and energy and fellowship into Sunday, but I am

very spiritual," she explained. "I started reading a lot, looking up things online, and I began understanding there are different gods—Hindus have cows as gods, Muslims always pray at the exact same time of day. I like the discipline of Muslims. But funnily enough when it comes to life lessons, Buddhism is the best—they teach you how to live with other people," she told me.

Awande was not alone in maintaining both a strong sense of her relationship with God while approaching other aspects of Christianity selectively, and being willing to integrate ideas and practices from other traditions as they forge new theologies of their own. Jude also sought out information about other faiths. "I've also been very drawn to Buddhism," they said. "Simply because of that sense of peace, the empathy, how they reflect on what being a human being means. I was introduced to Thich Naht Hanh at a mental health workshop, and I like the idea of being at peace as much as possible," they said. Likewise, Bongani—whose church promotes the idea of discernment—described how he and other university students at his church brought ideas from other religious traditions to bear on their Bible study. "We love viewing what other doctrines have," he told me. "We were just learning about this new wave of Christianity that preaches about Mother God," he said with enthusiasm. "I like that feminine aspect." For others, sources of spiritual sustenance are even more diffuse. Danny, who recalled his pastor citing endless scriptures about same-sex intimacies at Home Group, left the church as an adult. "Since I left home I've *never* been to church," he told me. "But I've got my own church across the street, in the drag bar—that's my church. We meet every Saturday. They actually call me the pastor of the sex workers," he said. "I still believe in God, and we have a good relationship," he told me.

For many queer people in Bulawayo, Pentecostalism was not simply a transition from one branch of Christianity to another or the final step on a quest for spiritual fulfilment. Encountering evangelical ideas about a personal and intimate God entailed a change in attitude towards what

faith might be and could offer, a shift from "religion" to "spirituality." Yet it didn't necessarily imply a fixed direction of travel and rarely involved embracing of a new set of well-defined doctrines, as both Pentecostal conversion narratives and literature on Pentecostalism suggest. Instead, Awande, Jude, Reggie, and others were excited by the prospect of charting their own paths, engaging with Christianity selectively and critically, and to forging theologies that were open to continuously integrating new elements. Awande's sense of there being "one spiritual realm" extended to ancestral traditions too, once the archetypal site of "religion." As she said, "Coming for a Catholic background I can tell you every Africa Day, we go to Matopo and pray," referring to the mountainous national park just outside of Bulawayo that's filled with dramatic balancing granite boulders, a place dotted with ancestral shrines and long considered a spiritually potent landscape (Ranger, 1999). "And if you ask an old *inyanga* why they go to Matopo," she said, invoking the name for a traditional diviner, "They will tell you, 'My ancestors showed me that place.' Like I said, it's all one spiritual realm." For an increasing number of young queer people in Bulawayo, ancestral spirituality has a distinctive pull. But as we shall see, seeking to revive ancestral practices often puts them in the at the center of a new set of tensions, especially with other family members.

Chapter 3

Ancestral Arguments:

Spirits, Secrecy, and the Struggle over Spiritual Authority

Lindiwe paused as she took a deep breath. "Before my grandmother passed away last year," she began, "People told me she was calling for me. Every time relatives visited her she would ask where I was. She asked if anyone had a photo of me and pleaded for me to visit her." Lindiwe paused again, her voice measured as she explained how conflicted she felt about this. "I didn't go and visit her because I grew up believing she was bad. Mum would tell us she's a traditional healer, the *bad* kind—like one that uses bad spirits." Her mother was a member of the Salvation Army church and committed to the church's central tenet that Christian salvation could be achieved through God alone. Because of this, Lindiwe's mother followed its injunctions to abandon ancestral practices. This put her at odds with her own mother, who was a practicing *sangoma*. Lindiwe's mother viewed the role of the *sangoma* as a dangerous traditional holdover and was determined to inhibit her mother passing on ancestral knowledge to her own children. A key means of achieving this was instilling fear in Lindiwe and her sister by raising the specter of *ubuthakathi*, or witchcraft. In doing so, Lindiwe's mother not only articulated a moral stance on ancestral practices but also made her children deeply fearful of their grandmother. "My whole life, my mother just told us our grandmother was *bad*, really bad, and I believed her," Lindiwe said. "I grew up afraid of my grandmother—I was scared she was going to give that gift to me."

We encountered Lindiwe in the previous chapter when she recounted her departure from the Salvation Army and move to a young Pentecostal congregation in the center of Bulawayo. For Lindiwe, her new church's encouragement to foster a personal relationship with God made

her feel loved by God for the first time in her life and helped make Christianity compatible with her experiences as a queer woman. Like others in the previous chapter, the strength of this relationship empowered her to engage critically with her church's occasionally homophobic sermonizing. Lindiwe's embrace of a different branch of Christianity inevitably became a source of tension with her mother, who questioned the expense of travelling to a church on the other side of town. But while Lindiwe's mother didn't entirely approve of her joining a new church, she was glad to see her daughter's passionate participation in Christian worship. And crucially, Lindiwe's new church served to deepen her suspicion of her grandmother. Its preaching on ancestors was even more denunciatory than that of the Salvation Army; like most Pentecostal congregations, Lindiwe's new church framed ancestors as demons and accused ancestral practitioners of participating in satanic rituals. "You're taught to completely shun that side," Lindiwe said, speaking of the Pentecostal perspective on ancestral spirituality. As a result of her mother's lessons and her church's preaching, she explained, "I was so scared of my grandmother—I didn't want anything to do with her."

In characterizing ancestral practitioners in these ways, both Lindiwe's mother and her church reinscribed the moral and epistemic shifts that have undermined ancestors' metaphysical foothold over the past two centuries. But these changes have done more than simply erode the social acceptability of participating in ancestral rituals. As Lindiwe's fear of her grandmother demonstrated, they have also rearranged relationships within families, drawing some people closer together and pushing others further apart. As in other times and places, suspicions about witchcraft and other apparently nefarious spiritual practices highlight points of social tension, both in interpersonal relationships and wider society (Bongmba, 2001; Douglas, 1970a; Evans-Pritchard, 1976; Favret-Saada, 1980; Federici, 2004; Geschiere, 1997; Marwick, 1970). When

ancestral practices become associated with witchcraft, those who participate in ancestral traditions are easily maligned and marginalized. In Zimbabwe, such individuals are disproportionately older and more rural. The changing consensus on ancestral practices has therefore targeted the traditional bedrock of elders' authority and undermined the status people expect to accrue as they age (Auslander, 1993; Livingston, 2005; Niehaus, 2021). As a result, shifting views on ancestral practices have shaped who can successfully claim and assert spiritual authority within family networks, enabling members of younger generations to sideline their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. In Lindiwe's family, her mother's account of her grandmother's spiritual practices served to undermine the elderly woman's authority within the family and inhibited her ability to pass on ancestral knowledge to her grandchildren.

While Lindiwe's mother appeared to have prevented the transmission of ancestral practices to her daughters, however, her efforts were not as effective as she'd hoped. Less than a year after her grandmother's death, Lindiwe began to reevaluate the story she had been told about her grandmother. Over time, she departed from aspects of the Christian teachings that had been imparted to her. Eventually, she came to view the role of the *sangoma* as someone chosen by ancestral spirits to convey wisdom to the living. In the process, Lindiwe gradually expanded the areas in which she felt confident to determine for herself the elements of Christian doctrine she upheld and those she was willing to depart from. More than this, she began to consider the possibility that she may be called to the same path as her grandmother. "I'm on a journey of trying to learn the traditional way of worshipping," Lindiwe explained. "I need to try to unlearn the Holy Spirit thing. More and more I think I want to go the way my grandmother used to." This reversal in Lindiwe's understanding involved challenging the images of legitimate religious practice she had received from her mother and the church, as well as renegotiating who she

viewed as sources of spiritual authority. It also entailed a great deal of discretion and secrecy as she carefully concealed her quest for ancestral knowledge from her mother.

Lindiwe was one of a growing number of young queer people in Bulawayo who were reconsidering the portrayal of ancestors they had received from both family members and church authorities. Drawing on their conviction that they have a strong personal relationship with God, they gradually developed confidence to carve out their own spiritual trajectories. This emboldened them to depart from their church's teachings on various topics, and some began to question the understandings of ancestral spirituality they had received from church and parental authorities. Those like Lindiwe were drawn to pursue ancestral spirituality by the sense that there were mysteries within their own families they felt compelled to resolve and a hope that ancestral spirituality may enable them to develop a fuller understanding of themselves. And rather than looking to church leaders or family elders as voices of authority, they increasingly turned to other young queer people to guide them on these spiritual journeys. In the process, they cast themselves and members of their own networks as new bearers of spiritual authority and began to rework ancestral spirituality to respond to distinctively queer predicaments.

In this chapter, I investigate how young queer people like Lindiwe come to change their minds about ancestral spirituality, and how these shifts index fraught negotiations over spiritual authority within families. In the first part of the chapter, I describe tensions within one family over questions of sexuality and ancestral spirituality, demonstrating how intimate family settings are shaped by various acts of secrecy and silence relating to both ancestors and sexual identity. Next, I show how ideas about authority, seniority, and eldership structure Zimbabwean families, and examine how the changing consensus surrounding ancestral spirituality has served to undermine the authority of elders. Then, I examine how young people contemplate consulting

with *sangomas* on their own, showing that they seek out *sangomas* to address unresolved questions about their families and to develop a richer understanding of themselves. Next, I consider how young queer people's interest in ancestral spirituality further complicates their family dynamics, and why many young queer people ultimately decide to pursue ancestral spirituality apart from their families entirely. Finally, I explore how young queer people turn to one another as they learn about ancestral spirituality and recast themselves as voices of spiritual authority, laying the groundwork for a broader reinvention of ancestral practices.

Secrecy and Suspicion

In a small house on the outskirts of Bulawayo, Bernard sat between his mother Sheila and sister Juliet on the family's living room sofa. As we made small talk, Sheila boiled water to make tea and Juliet opened a packet of biscuits, joking that she thought she would faint on the way home from church the day before; the November heat had topped 40 degrees celsius and across the city people were struggling with the temperature. Bernard sighed in agreement and added that he hoped the rains would come soon—the heat was testing everyone's endurance. From this affable conversation it appeared that the three of them got on well, but beneath the surface there lay complex and at times fraught dynamics between three members of this family that had given rise to webs of secrecy and suspicion, particularly in relation to sexuality and spiritual practice. These tensions tested their relationships and sometimes threatened to tear the family apart, yet they maintained a precarious balance and continued to live under one roof. The dynamics within Bernard's family were a microcosm of those that crosscut Zimbabwean society, illustrating how tensions surrounding sexuality and ancestral spirituality shape and test kinship ties.

Bernard was in his late thirties, shy and reserved to the point of being a little awkward. He was always dressed formally, wearing a shirt and tie complete with a brass tie clip every time we met, but became animated when discussing topics he was passionate about. One of his passions was Seventh Day Adventism, the church he had been raised in. In our conversations he frequently quoted the words of Adventist founders or hummed the tune of favorite church hymns. In childhood he had accompanied his sister and grandmother to services every Saturday and had spent his younger years immersed in the church. While in his words the church cultivated in him "a deep reverence for God," it was not an easy space in which to grapple with his sexuality in adolescence. This is because the Adventist church was, in his words, "not exactly gay friendly." For this reason, Bernard described himself in childhood as "an isolated gay," aware of his attraction to men but lacking a vocabulary to describe it. As a teenager he read about the organization Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) in a small article at the back of *The Chronicle*, Bulawayo's main newspaper, and immediately felt he had discovered language for understanding part of himself. When he got access to the internet in his mid-twenties, he managed to locate the organization and signed up to become a member. Through GALZ, he found a place for himself in Bulawayo's queer landscape, attending social events and meeting romantic partners, although shying away from the more vocal activism that other members of the organization pursued. Despite this new queer community, Bernard maintained secrecy about his sexuality with his mother and sister. "It's not the kind of thing I want to tell them; it's very taboo in our society," he explained.

Bernard's discretion about his sexuality illustrates how various acts of silence and secrecy, among both queer and non-queer people, shape how queer people experienced "the closet" in

Zimbabwe.[1] Bernard's experience was common among my interlocutors, and fewer than half had directly discussed their sexual identities with family members. This doesn't mean their relatives didn't have suspicions about their sexuality, however, and in Bernard's case his experience of sexual secrecy reflected distinctive dynamics within his family. "Even though I've never told my mother about my sexuality," Bernard explained, "Her ancestral spirits might have told her." His mother Sheila, who on that hot November day wore a few bangles and strings of beads that hinted at her vocation, was a trained *sangoma*. Decades previously, Sheila had learned she had been chosen by several ancestral spirits known as *amadlozi* to be their medium and underwent a year-long period of formal training known as *ukuthwasa* to become an accredited *sangoma*.[2] At the time we met, she regularly received clients to the family's home who came to consult with her about various dilemmas.

Amadlozi communicate with their hosts through dreams and visions, which gives them access to unspoken and secret information.[3] They know all sorts of things that are not available to the living, and while their hosts regularly consult with them on behalf of others, *amadlozi* can take it upon themselves to convey unsolicited or secret information. They might reveal that a particular individual practices witchcraft, salacious details about an extramarital affair, or an impending family disaster. But knowing something and knowing how to act on it are different things, Bernard explained. "If *amadlozi* tell you something in your dreams, sometimes it's very hard to tell anyone," he said. "It can be very difficult to say out loud—often it's too sensitive for

[1] For literature on sexual secrecy and queerness in the West, and the idiom of the closet, see Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and David Grindstaff's *Rhetorical Secrets* (2006).

[2] Her accreditation is with Zimbabwe's official traditional healers' association, ZINATHA, which I discuss in Chapter 1. All *sangomas* must register with ZINATHA and if they don't they are considered fraudulent healers in the eyes of the law, and can be prosecuted under the current incarnation of the Witchcraft Suppression Act, which was last amended in 2006 (The Herald, 2006).

[3] Among *sangomas* and other traditionalists, dreams and visions are highly significant, a prime means for the living to access the world of spirits (Makwasha, 2010; Reynolds, 1992). Dreams are the principal medium through which ancestors communicate with their descendants, and *sangomas* often ask about dreams during consultations.

others to hear." Knowledge about his sexuality was exactly the kind of thing Bernard suspected his mother may have learned about from her *amadlozi*, but decided to keep to herself. Indeed, Sheila also played a role in reproducing the secrecy surrounding Bernard's sexuality, and he was left to speculate about exactly what she knew.

Bernard was personally aware of the difficulty of grappling with this kind of sensitive information. "In Ndebele we say *inkosi izala inkosi*—'A king begets a king,'" he told me. "That may be why I have spirits, because I inherited them from my mother." Not long after Bernard joined GALZ, he discovered he had many signs that suggested the presence of ancestral spirits—vivid dreams of elders in traditional attire giving him instructions, a series of unexplained health problems, and a string of failed personal endeavors—all of which are archetypal indications of an ancestral calling. In general, ancestral spirits seek to gain their host's attention forcefully, hoping that imposing hardships on them will eventually encourage them to consult with a *sangoma* (Nkabinde, 2008; Van Binsbergen, 1991). Initially the notion he had an ancestral calling was very hard for Bernard to accept, given that it was so at odds with the Seventh Day Adventist church's doctrine. Indeed, he had only ever attended church with his sister and grandmother as a child because his mother's status as a *sangoma* meant she was not able to participate in congregational worship. But repeated consultations with *sangomas* led him to believe that ancestral spirits had chosen him, and eventually felt he had no option but to accept his calling. Indeed, Bernard told me, he believed that not accepting it would have eventually resulted in his death.

After accepting *amadlozi* were the cause of his troubles, Bernard underwent is own process of *ukuthwasa*, or initiation, and became a *sangoma* in his own right. At this point, his health and personal problems began to abate, but in other ways he discovered that inheriting

ancestral spirits was not easy. Materially, it entailed various privations. Each spirit demanded its own wardrobe of clothes and an assortment of specialized tools, and continued to request new items. The cost of his initiation as well as the spirits' collection of clothing and tools stretched his finances and the income he generated from consultations barely covered the costs associated with the vocation. Just as demanding was the weight that ancestral knowledge entailed. Like his mother, Bernard's spirits often told him information through dreams, and he struggled with the pressure of knowing so much sensitive information. "If an *idlozi* comes in my dream and says, 'So and so is a witch,' or, 'So and so slept with someone's wife,' or, 'So and so went to that house and stole a hundred dollars'—I can't say that out loud. Imagine the trouble it would cause!," he explained. "Really, it's not easy being a *sangoma*."

Inheriting ancestral spirits and accepting a calling to become a *sangoma* puts you at the heart of tangled web of interpersonal dynamics. While the *sangoma* is notionally just a vessel for their ancestral spirits, they are often the object of scrutiny and distrust. As I.M. Lewis (1986) argued, the apparently opposite roles of the *sangoma* and the witch—one who heals, and one who intentionally inflicts harm—are unstable in practice. Both are expressions of charismatic spiritual power, the boundaries of which are always being challenged, contested, and reworked. Moreover, the vocation is subject to deep skepticism in contemporary Zimbabwean society. As we saw in Chapter 1, since the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899, religious institutions and state authorities have frequently associated ancestral practices with witchcraft. The Seventh Day Adventist church that Bernard was raised in is famously hostile to ancestral spirituality (Keller, 2005). Although he still privately subscribed to Adventist doctrine, his initiation as a *sangoma* marked the end of his regular attendance at church. "Adventism is still deeply rooted in my heart," Bernard explained, "But when people at church became aware I was a *sangoma,* they

began treating me differently. They were discriminatory and they made me feel unwelcome," he told me. "It was so difficult to leave my church, but in the end I had no choice," he said.

While these tensions are acutely felt in public spaces like the church, closer to home they play out in complex and unpredictable ways. Bernard brought me to visit his family so I could meet his mother Sheila and discuss her life as a *sangoma*. Like many established *sangomas* I met, Sheila was enthusiastic to talk to me and began mapping out the types of the spirits she channeled and their distinctive skills. In order to illustrate each of her spirits' personalities, she showed me the various items of clothing, tools, and plant medicines she used in consultations, piling them up on the sofa next to Bernard's sister Juliet. Having been raised in this household, Juliet was very familiar with the world of ancestral spirituality and its material accoutrements.

Figure 10. A *sangoma's* plant medicines stored in pots and bags in a corner of their home. Photo by author.

When I asked about her mother's plant medicines, she went behind the sofa and pulled out an empty sack of maize meal that was filled with dried branches and leaves, ready to be ground into medicinal powders. "You can see how much there is—it fills the whole house," she said, laughing. Juliet went around the room pulling small packages of plant matter out from their hiding places and handing them to me one by one. At first, I was surprised by Juliet's relaxed attitude to her mother's medicines and the discussion about her ancestral spirits. On the way to visit the house, Bernard had told me that his sister was a devout Adventist and sometimes hostile to ancestral practices, and I had previously encountered Adventists who expressed deep apprehensions about ancestral spirituality.

As Sheila began to show me more of her spirits' clothes and tools, however, Juliet became nervous. When Sheila placed a crown of ostrich feathers on her head, belonging to her most powerful *idlozi*, Juliet gently admonished her mother and said, "Mama, please don't wear it for too long."[4] Sheila took it off and instead began wrapping a white cloth around her waist that belonged to a different spirit, and started to tell me the spirit's biography. "Mama, be careful!" Juliet warned her, increasingly agitated. "You shouldn't be careless." Juliet's concerns stemmed from the fact that ancestral spirits are drawn to the clothing and other items that belong to them. If their host holds or wears an item belonging to it, a spirit can take it as a sign—an invitation, even—to come closer, and may begin to speak through its host. Indeed, when I visited Bernard's home a few days earlier, this happened as he modelled the full regalia of his most powerful spirit for me. Dressed in a white wraparound skirt and an ostrich feather headdress, Bernard held an *itshoba* or traditional fly swat in each hand, made of thin wooden handles and long black hair from a zebra's tail. Out of habit, he began tapping the *itshoba* on alternating shoulders, an action

[4] *Idlozi* is the singular of *amadlozi*.

that is often used during consultations to summon spirits. After a few seconds he began to grunt and shiver, classic signs of the onset of spirit possession. Bernard surprised himself by the spirits' sudden presence, and quickly put the *itshoba* down and removed the headdress. For several minutes afterwards he was distracted by his *amadozi's* proximity and attempts to communicate with him, and they took some time to leave us.

In the living room of Bernard's mother's house, Juliet was worried about just such an occurrence. Although she tolerated the presence of ancestral objects in the house, she refused to be present when the spirits were actively channeled and was fearful of what might happen if they were beckoned via their clothing or tools. For Juliet, ancestral spirits were dangerous. While she had more moderate opinions than some Adventists and other Christians, who viewed the kinds of rituals her mother and brother practiced as a form of witchcraft, she was nervous about the unpredictable and potentially malevolent powers of ancestral spirits. As her mother continued to detail the different items in her spirits' wardrobes, Juliet's protests increased. "Put everything away now, Mama," she implored, raising her voice. Reluctantly, Sheila took off the spirits' clothes and folded them into a neat pile.

Figure 11. A *sangoma's* clothes and animal skins used for channeling different spirits. Photo by author.

Juliet glanced in the direction of the bedroom, and her mother took it as a cue to return the items to her private room, away from Juliet, and a quiet stalemate resumed.

The tensions that were apparent during my visit to Bernard's family home reflected the complex negotiations surrounding sexuality and ancestral spirituality that crosscut many Zimbabwean families. Bernard's family had come to an awkward impasse in which he kept his sexual identity secret while speculating that his mother may in fact know about it. Likewise, the family had a tacit agreement about their spiritual practices, where he and his mother actively practice ancestral spirituality but maintained a level of discretion to appease Juliet. Bernard's family dynamics demonstrate that acts of secrecy don't only operate to suppress information, but also produce particular types of experiences and relationships (Smart, 2011). Acts of secrecy can refashion relations between people, facilitating the incremental acceptance of someone's sexual identity and working against established power dynamics structured along the lines of age and gender (Van Dijk et al., 2020). As such, secrecy can be a productive force that enables apparent contradictions to coexist while simultaneously making space for creative exploration. But as ancestral practices are pushed further to the margins of Zimbabwean society, they have become ever more bound up with the logics of secrecy and suspicion, frequently becoming a battleground for contests over authority within families.

Challenging Elders' Authority

The birth of Hope's first daughter, Thandiwe, set off a struggle over her umbilical cord. Historically, the umbilical cord—known as an *inkaba* in Ndebele—had potent spiritual associations and vital properties that helped connect a child to its lineage.[5] Ritual practices

[5] As I explain below, the term *inkaba* refers specifically to the hardened end of the umbilical cord that remains attached to a newborn's navel for the first few weeks of their life. The word is variously translated as "navel" and

involving the *inkaba* served to bind a newborn to the land and their ancestors, and these resonances remain significant to many in the rural areas. But as we have seen, ancestral practices are increasingly marginalized in the city to the point that young urban people are frequently unaware of the historical significance of the *inkaba*. For some, especially Pentecostals, ritual practices surrounding the *inkaba* are dangerous, and it is feared that such activities risk summoning demonic spirits and triggering a series of uncontrollable future events. In Chapter 1, we saw how struggles over ancestors have mediated contests for power, influence, and authority over the span of centuries in Zimbabwe. In the context of tight knit family networks, members of younger generations can undermine the status and authority of elders by challenging their spiritual practices when it comes to matters like the *inkaba*, while simultaneously asserting their own authority.

Thandiwe's mother, Hope, was in her early thirties when the struggle over the *inkaba* unfolded. Hope has had close intimate relationships with several women over the course of her life, but she didn't use identity terms to describe her sexuality. In her late twenties, she chose to marry her husband Jacob to provide stability for her three children, of whom Thandiwe was the last born. In the weeks after Thandiwe's birth, the newborn's *inkaba*—the hardened end of the umbilical cord that remains attached a baby's navel for the first few weeks of their life—became the object of a contest that took Hope by surprise. Historically, handling the *inkaba* correctly helped forge attachments between a newborn child, the land, and their ancestors, ensuring the child's protection and lifelong good fortune. The location of a person's *inkaba* identifies their village of origin, and the phrase *"Inkaba yakho iphi?"*—literally, "Where is your *inkaba*?"—is a means of asking about the location of a person's rural home in Ndebele (Midgley, 2006). The

"umbilical cord," but I choose to leave it untranslated due to the absence of an equivalent English language word. For the significance of umbilical cords in other African ancestral traditions, see Karen Middleton (1995).

precise treatment of the *inkaba* varies from clan to clan; in some it is buried beside important anthills, and in others it is cast into spiritually significant rivers. One older *sangoma* told me that if the *inkaba* didn't fall off after several weeks it indicated that a child had not been properly introduced to their ancestors and raised doubts about their future wellbeing. In the past, then, the *inkaba* played a role in the forging of kinship relations by connecting a child to its ancestors and was a vital medium for the development of social personhood.[6]

As a young woman who grew up in the city, Hope didn't view her daughter's *inkaba* as particularly significant. "Many young people just flush it down the toilet," she told me dryly. Left to her own devices she would have been content to discard it and not think about it any further. But shortly after Thandiwe's birth, her husband Jacob's elderly grandmother set off from her rural home in the region of Lupane to collect it. The trip was an arduous two-day journey for a woman approaching her nineties, involving fifty miles on unpaved roads, hours in the sun waiting for buses, and sweltering journeys in crowded vehicles. But for her, acquiring her great-granddaughter's *inkaba* was essential for ensuring the baby's ancestral protection and future wellbeing. Afterwards, she planned to carry Thandiwe's *inkaba* to her home village where she would conduct the necessary rituals to help forge a connection to her rural home and ancestors. Hope was a little surprised by the sudden arrival of Jacob's grandmother, but she was content to hand it over. Indeed, she would have done so if it hadn't been for her own mother's vociferous objections.

Hope's mother is a Pentecostal pastor in her fifties who leads a small but growing congregation in Bulawayo, an offshoot of a large South African church led by a popular

[6] For more on the vital materiality of the body, see Stacy Langwick's *Bodies, Politics, and African Healing: The Matter of Maladies in Tanzania* (2011) and Florence Bernault's *Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon* (2019). For more on the connections between bodies and place, see Nancy Munn (1996) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2015).

television preacher. While Hope is also Pentecostal, she isn't as active in or devoted to the church as her mother. "My Mum is a very serious Christian," she told me with a knowing smile. For Hope's mother, allowing Thandiwe's *inkaba* to be ritually handled hundreds of miles from the city put her granddaughter in serious danger. "My Mum said that if they did that, Thandiwe might never get married, might be barren, or might become promiscuous—all types of generational curses that Pentecostals say are handed down by ancestors," Hope explained. Hope's mother intended to break the transmission of ancestral practices within her family with the intent of protecting future generations. "To be honest, I let them battle it out," Hope told me. "My Mum put the *inkaba* in the rubbish, but then my husband's grandmother retrieved it," she said, laughing at the events that unfolded around her while she focused on Thandiwe. "In the end I think Mum took it home and flushed it down the toilet so nobody could get at it, and that was the end of it. Of course, Jacob's grandmother was very disappointed," she said, looking a little guilty. "But she must have known she was fighting a losing battle."

From the moment of her birth, Thandiwe's relatives not only sought to put her on the right moral course but to exercise their spiritual authority over her and within the wider family. In Zimbabwe, as in many Southern African societies, age conventionally confers respect and is one of the most significant forms of social status. Whereas in the West physical aging often entails the loss of social personhood, many older Zimbabweans express their enjoyment about the esteem and social status they accrue as they age (Lamb, 2015). As Julie Livingston described for neighboring southeastern Botswana, symptoms of aging like limited mobility and the use of canes represent "the power of elderhood and the aggregation of dependents rather than the loss of independence" (2005, p. 6). Moreover, the status conferred by elderhood was historically intertwined with ancestors. As Igor Kopytoff (1971) argued, respect for seniority underpinned

reverence towards ancestors in Africa; ancestral spirits are senior to the elderly in the way that elders are senior to younger generations. Kopytoff also noted semantic associations in many Central and Southern African languages between ideas about authority and terms describing growth, age, maturity, eldership, and ancestors—a whole nexus of idioms that privilege age and social maturity. Elders were able to use this status to position themselves as voices of authority on spiritual matters, both by virtue of their relative proximity to ancestors in age and the depth of their knowledge on ancestral matters. And perhaps most trenchantly, Meyer Fortes argued that "the real test of having achieved personhood is to have had the potentiality, all through life, of becoming worshipped as an ancestor" (1973, p. 293).

This being the case, Jacob's grandmother should have had the last word over the fate of Thandiwe's *inkaba*. She was both senior to Hope's mother in terms of age and a member of Thandiwe's patrilineage—that is, her father's ancestral line—through which the newborn's genealogy was traced. But as Hope's mother's actions suggest, elders' authority is frequently called into question in contemporary Zimbabwe. I follow Hannah Arendt (1961) in conceptualizing authority as the ability to guide and influence the actions of others without the need for verbal persuasion or coercive force.[7] At its most effective, people instinctively recognize authority and adjust their behavior accordingly (Sennett, 1980). But as Arendt indicates, when the historical foundations of a particular form of authority are questioned—in this case, the ancestral traditions that underpin the status of elders—it is loses its effectiveness and begins to require persuasion, or worse, coercion. For this reason, Arendt argues that authority and tradition are inherently interconnected; in her words, "The past, to the extent that it

[7] As Arendt states, "Authority precludes the use of external means of coercion where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation […] If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments." (1961, p. 93).

is passed on as tradition, has authority; authority, to the extent that it presents itself as history, becomes tradition" (2005, p. 73). In Arendt's view, then, when tradition falls into crisis—for instance, when shared tellings of the past are lost, or moral consensus about that past is undermined—it creates a crisis of authority in the present.[8]

The shifting consensus regarding the morality and efficacy of ancestral practices has created just such a crisis of authority for older people in Zimbabwe. While many are devoted members of Christian congregations, older people—especially those in the rural areas—are more likely to practice ancestral spirituality. Older and more rural people are also more likely to view church attendance as compatible with ongoing participation in ancestral spirituality (Premawardhana, 2018a); as one interlocutor put it, young urban Zimbabweans often consider themselves "full time Christians" in contrast to their "part time" older and rural family members. These are broad generalizations, but tensions surrounding ancestral practices index the depth of divides between the lifeways and perspectives of members of different generations, and those living in urban and rural areas (Epstein, 1981; Mannheim, 1952). Particularly as Pentecostal discourses have come to shape ideas about ethical practices among younger people in Zimbabwe, the historic tendency to see the rural areas as the moral heartland in contrast to the "immorality" of the city has to a large extent been reversed (Ferguson, 1992). At their most stark, these generational and rural-urban distinctions manifest as witchcraft accusations that target older people (Auslander, 1993; Hari, 2009; Niehaus, 2021)—and elderly women in particular (Amoah, 1987; Drucker-Brown, 1993; E. N. Goody, 1970)—reflecting both suspicions about their

[8] For Arendt, the weakening of authority in the modern world can be attributed to the loss of attachment to the principles that underpin relations of authority; that is, to the traditions in which authority is embedded. In particular, Arendt was concerned about the loss a shared sense of "tradition" in the modern West and the resulting crisis of authority, which she viewed as a key element of the predicament of modern politics.

spiritual practices and resentment towards their historic social status.[9] For younger, urban people—including many middle aged people who are the parents of my interlocutors—it is no longer morally acceptable or socially advantageous to participate in ancestral rites (Cole, 2013).

These social changes have thrown elders' authority into crisis, but they have also created openings for members of younger generations to position themselves as alternative—and potentially more legitimate—bearers of authority. Drawing on the hegemony of Christian and especially Pentecostal teachings, younger family members tie themselves to forms of authority stemming from Christian traditions, for instance biblical texts or their pastors' teachings. At the same time, Christianity grants social status to older church members and many denominations formally recognize elderhood as a form of status within the church (MacKinlay & Cameron, 2019). In this sense, the struggle over Thandiwe's *inkaba* was an assertion of Hope's mother's spiritual authority over that of Jacob's grandmother. By winning out and preventing the elderly woman from securing Thandiwe's *inkaba*, Hope's mother began to circumscribe the relationship her granddaughter would have with her paternal great-grandmother. Having the final say on Thandiwe's *inkaba* bolstered her influence within the family and brought the newborn under her spiritual authority. Likewise, in the case of Lindiwe—who we met at the beginning of this chapter—her mother's assertions about her grandmother served to shore up her mother's spiritual authority and undermined any relationship her children might have with their grandmother. Ultimately, Lindiwe's mother tried to ensure her children would have so little access to their grandmother that she wouldn't be able to pass on knowledge of ancestral traditions.

[9] In literature on witchcraft accusations, scholars have often noted how changing social and economic conditions have led to a proliferation of accusations against those whose social role poses problems for social reproduction. For instance, Silvia Federici (2004) argued that as feudalism gave way to capitalism in the late middle ages in Europe, women's labor and knowledge outside of the domestic sphere came to be seen as deviant and suspect. For her, those accused as witches embodied roles that had to be destroyed for the new economic order to develop: healers, disobedient wives, childless women, and women who lived alone. See also E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1976), Mary Douglas (1970b), and Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980).

In certain moments, Hope and Lindiwe's mothers appeared to have won out over their elderly relatives. But as Arendt points out, modern assertions of authority are often contingent and open-ended. In contrast to the ancestral cosmologies of the past, authority based on forms of contemporary Christianity like Pentecostalism are less secure. As we have seen, Zimbabwe's religious landscape is heavily fragmented and Christian spiritual authority is constantly subject to contestation, especially as the numbers of preachers and prophets who jockey for influence continues to proliferate. Not only do many young people depart from the mainline congregations in which they were raised for Pentecostal denominations, but they continue to have highly mobile congregational affiliations as adults (Haynes, 2017; Premawardhana, 2018b). Moreover, Pentecostal visions of the self tend to imagine people to be unencumbered by the opinions and dictates of non-Pentecostal institutions and family members. And perhaps most critically, the Pentecostal idea of having a personal relationship with God implies that spiritual authority may be completely decoupled from the institutions and figureheads of the church.

These negotiations play out in specific and unpredictable ways in each family, reflecting the unique dynamics among individuals in any given network of kin. In Lindiwe's case, as she grew older she struggled to accept the notion that her grandmother practiced *ubuthakathi*, or witchcraft. "Looking at my grandmother, there's really nothing to indicate that she was a bad person," she explained. Just as significantly, Lindiwe came to have suspicions about the exact source of her mother's fears about her grandmother. She began to speculate that her mother's animosity stemmed not only from a moral disagreement but a personal dislike. "Now I'm thinking maybe what Mum said is not true—it was just a game she was playing," Lindiwe told me. "Maybe they just didn't like each other, and she didn't want me to get anything from her." Increasingly Lindiwe felt that in the context of her family the insinuation of witchcraft

articulated a particular set of interpersonal grievances. When Lindiwe and Hope's mothers called into question the spiritual authority of older members of their families, they expected their children to follow their own instructions. But in the process, they unwittingly established a precedent that elders' authority can be questioned and ultimately rejected. This a principle was evident in the paths Hope and Lindiwe pursued next.

Clandestine Consultations

Gogo MaNcube sat on the floor of her consulting room in Nketa, a densely populated suburb on the south-western edge of Bulawayo.[10] She was in her seventies and wore a simple t-shirt and patterned wraparound skirt. Her unadorned outfit revealed a few subtle indications of her vocation as a *sangoma;* around her neck hung several narrow strings of beads—one for each class of ancestral spirit she channeled—and lying across her lap was a small wooden ornamental *induku,* or knobkerry. Her consulting room doubled as one of two bedrooms in the house, which occupied a floor of a well-worn 1960s concrete building that was home to Gogo, her husband, two of her adult children, and their four grandchildren. The room was packed with the tools of her craft, many of which were hidden under swathes of cloth that obscured teetering piles of plastic pots and jars, each filled with herbs, animal hides, and plant remedies. As we spoke, her one-year-old grandson David wandered around the room, occasionally picking up and examining some of her specialized items—clay bowls, the skin of an impala, wooden divining pieces, small drums—which were carefully prized from his hands and put back where they belonged by his mother, Gertrude.

[10] As a marker of their status of seniority, *sangomas* are known as either Gogo (grandmother) or Khulu (grandfather), followed by their surname, regardless of their age. The "Ma" in Gogo MaNcube's name reflects conventions surrounding names of married women in Ndebele; Ncube is her maiden name and the prefix "Ma" indicates she is married.

Figure 12. Gogo MaNcube's consulting tools. Photo by author.

Sitting next to me on the floor of Gogo MaNcube's consulting room was Hope, about to solicit the advice of a *sangoma* for the first time in her life. She was nervous, deeply aware that her mother—a Pentecostal pastor who had done everything she could to protect her from the "demonic" world of ancestral spirits—would be horrified to know she was here. In the months prior to this day, Hope had become curious about the world of ancestral spirituality. The struggle over her daughter Thandiwe's *inkaba* was now six years in the past, and it hadn't played a central role in fostering her interest in ancestral spirituality. More significant was that Hope had come to feel there were things about herself and her family she didn't fully understand, and she suspected her mother might have kept details of her family history hidden from her. At the same time, she'd begun to have dreams about her mother taking her to consult with a *sangoma* when she was a baby. Since her parents split when she was an infant and her mother had become a devoted to Pentecostalism over time, she had been left with a sense of mystery about who she

was and what her future might hold. Learning more about ancestral spirituality by consulting with Gogo MaNcube promised to answer some of the questions Hope had about the ancestral spirits she suspected she had inherited. It also promised to resolve her craving for a better framework for understanding herself and her experiences. “It has everything to do with who I am, my history, my identity,” she said. “I just know there’s something more to me and I want to find out,” Hope explained. At the same time, Hope had come to feel that Christianity might not be as antithetical to ancestral spirituality as her mother had insisted. “The more I think about it, the more I feel that all our ancestors can’t simply be demons,” she told me. “It just doesn’t make sense to me.” That said, she still retained a strong identity as a Christian and was beginning to imagine the two schemes as potentially compatible. “I realized that God made my ancestors, so I don’t see them in conflict as I used to,” Hope explained.

Gogo MaNcube was a well-established and powerful *sangoma*. She had first learned about her ancestral calling at the age of nineteen, nearly six decades ago, when she discovered she had been chosen by the most important ancestral spirit in her lineage to be its host. Over time, she came to know that it was a potent ancestral spirit named Nyepu and proceeded to undergo *ukuthwasa*, a formal year-long initiation process, and became a fully-fledged *sangoma* in her own right. Gogo MaNcube also told me that she was the descendent of a number of powerful chiefs whose spirits she now channeled. “As the heir of our family lineage, I am the rightful chief of my home area near Kariba,” she explained, though by virtue of living in Bulawayo she didn’t hold the office. Many *sangomas* were discrete about the identities of their ancestral spirits, fearful that others may try to apprehend their powers for themselves, and at first Gogo’s candidness surprised me. From the moment she learned about my research she had been enthusiastic to participate, telling me that she’d been looking for someone to document her

knowledge. As a powerful *sangoma*, Gogo MaNcube strove to assert herself as an authority among other *sangomas*. Given that ancestral spirituality doesn't have a formalized hierarchy or fixed offices asserting authority was an ongoing effort, particularly against the background of a religious landscape dominated by Christian churches. Over time, I came to realize that for Gogo MaNcube talking to me was an opportunity for her to both challenge the marginalization of ancestral spirituality and situate herself as a preeminent voice of authority on ancestral matters.

Gogo prepared herself for Hope's consultation by putting on a white wraparound skirt over her patterned one, positioning a headdress of black ostrich feathers on her head, and wrapping another cloth—half white and half navy blue—around her shoulders. She picked up a small spherical pot and took some tobacco from it, spread a small amount over her face and hair, and snuffed a little up her nose. As she let the tobacco do its work, she closed her eyes, rocked back and forth, beginning to go into trance. After several minutes, her eyes opened and she started to speak in the voice of an old man—her *khulu,* or grandfather spirit, Nyepu.[11] Her daughter Gertrude worked as her *sanyongwanya,* or spiritual assistant, and helped to parse ancestral advice for those who came for consultations. "Explain the situation," Gertrude told Hope, who stared uneasily at the floor. "I think there's something spiritual going on with me," Hope began. She provided examples of strange occurrences that she suspected might have an ancestral cause. "Elders come up to me in the street and greet me with *salibonani*," she said, and Gogo and Gertrude nodded in recognition. *Salibonani* is a formal greeting in Ndebele that's usually reserved for those who are in a relation of seniority to the speaker. It's unusual for an older person to address a younger person in this way, and over time Hope wondered if these older

[11] For previous accounts of the process of spirit possession in Zimbabwe, see Joost Fontein (2011), David Lan (1985), and Tony Perman (2011).

strangers saw something "spiritual" in her—that is, that they detected the presence of an *idlozi*, or ancestral spirit. Greeting her formally with *salibonani* was a way of recognizing the spirit and the relative seniority of its chosen host. "And I dream," Hope went on, and Gertrude prompted her to say more about her dreams. "I dream of snakes," she said. Hope proceeded to detail the many dreams she'd had involving serpents: following her as she walked the streets of her neighborhood, coming to her house and speaking in an old dialect of Shona, Ndau, and chasing her as she ran through a field in the rural areas. "I dream of snakes at least once a week," Hope told Gogo.

Among *sangomas* and other traditionalists, dreams and visions are highly significant, a prime means for the living to access the world of spirits (Makwasha, 2010; Reynolds, 1992). Dreams are the principal medium through which ancestors communicate with their descendants, and *sangomas* often ask about dreams during consultations. The appearance of serpents in dreams are a potent symbol of the presence of *amadlozi*, the most powerful class of ancestral spirit. But they are riddled with symbols and their precise meaning is often unclear. Part of a *sangoma's* expertise is providing accurate and compelling interpretations of their clients' dreams, identifying both the issues they reveal and the futures they might anticipate. A snake could indicate a benevolent spirit that ought to be nurtured or an aggrieved ancestor that needs to be appeased, for instance. Parsing her mother's guidance for Hope, Gertrude went on, "*Khulu* says you have a strong female spirit, a *gogo*, that comes from the water. It's a rainmaking spirit, and it's very powerful." She continued, "He says you should develop your spirit and follow your journey." *Khulu*, the grandfather spirit, paused and gave Hope one final piece of advice. "You must be careful; people in your family have fought over these spirits before," Gertrude explained. "Other people want your powers." This was Gogo's final piece of information, and

after it had been delivered she gradually came out of her trance, looking a little dazed. Her voice returned to its usual register and she began to remove her ceremonial clothing, folding it into a pile beside her. As normal, she didn't remember the contents of the conversation that had just unfolded between her grandfather spirit Nyepu and Hope, so Gertrude summarized it for her mother. As payment for the consultation Hope placed US$10 in a bowl next to Gogo and thanked her, while Gogo encouraged her to come back again soon.

Outside in the bright sunlight, Hope and I walked back towards the center of town on foot. "Whew!" she exclaimed. "That was so scary, to be honest with you. My heart is still racing! I've always been taught to be scared of *sangomas*." But while Hope didn't feel entirely at ease in the presence of a *sangoma*, she felt encouraged to continue pursuing what she called her "spiritual journey" by learning more about her ancestral spirits. As we walked towards the center of Bulawayo, she told me that some of the information Gogo had provided concurred with what she suspected—that she'd inherited an important spirit and needed to develop a relationship with it. She was also struck by what Gogo told her about family struggles over the spirits; she recalled hearing something about tensions in her father's family regarding spirits when she was young, before her mother became so devoted to the church. More than this, she felt she wanted to nurture the spirit. But she wasn't exactly sure where to turn next; as she explained, "I feel I'm caught in the middle of my parents and grandparents, and I don't know which way to go." At this point, however, she was hesitant to put all of her faith in Gogo. "I was referred to her by a friend," Hope explained. "I think she knows what she's doing, but you have to be careful—she might want something from me that I don't understand." Hope's concern reflected her continued uncertainty about who and what to trust, an inherent element of quests for ancestral knowledge

and power. “I’m going to take it slow,” she said. “I think I’ll continue learning on my own for now.”

Hope was not alone among my interlocutors in being drawn to ancestral spirituality by the sense that there was more to her family dynamics than she understood and to fully understand she would have to look beyond Christianity. Like Hope, Lindiwe had chosen to consult with a *sangoma*—a transwoman named Thando who we met in the introduction—by the sense that she was receiving important information through her dreams and that there was more to her family than she’d been told, specifically the nature of the relationship between her mother and grandmother. In recent years, Lindiwe had begun to feel that her dreams contained warnings of future events and wondered whether a *sangoma* could help her understand if an ancestor was trying to communicate with her. “I felt like something’s calling me, and I was drawn to the traditional side for answers,” she explained. In Lindiwe’s case, it had been a friend who first suggested *amadlozi* might be the cause of her dreams. She was initially apprehensive about this possibility but it piqued her curiosity. As she considered it, Lindiwe frequently prayed until she felt she had God’s blessing to pursue ancestral spirituality. “Obviously it’s scary, because you’ve been taught that it’s bad and it feels like there’s no roadmap you can follow,” she admitted. Like Hope, she concealed her visit to a *sangoma* from her family. “I can’t really go home and say, ‘Remember that grandmother who passed away? I’m now following her path,’ when they basically told you she was a witch,” Lindiwe said, smiling.

Hope’s experience with Gogo MaNcube illustrates the things young queer people must overcome as they reconsider the messages they’ve received from parents and church authorities about *sangomas* and *amadlozi*. For most of my interlocutors, the discourses that surround ancestors have made them deeply fearful of ancestral spirituality by the time they reach early

adulthood, and entering a *sangoma's* consulting room for the first time is a deeply intimidating experience. Despite this, many are increasingly skeptical of and willing to question the authority of both their parents and churches. At the same time, however, they also have various seeds that ignite their interest in learning more about ancestral spirituality: a sense that there may be more to their families than they know, a pattern of vivid and uncanny dreams, and a desire to gain a fuller understanding of themselves. This is especially so for young queer people as they develop their sense of self and formulate identities in an often homophobic context. For many, the journey of uncovering hidden information and acquiring forbidden knowledge proves to be enticing. Engaging with ancestral spirituality undoubtedly entails secrecy but is rewarded with incremental nuggets of information about themselves and their families. But because ancestral spirits are inherently familial and older generations harbor the most knowledge about ancestors, young people must grapple with the question of who to trust as they pursue their spiritual journeys.

Cultivating Queer Spiritual Authority

"For me, the greatest challenge has always been how to reconcile who I am with my spirituality," Maria said. "My father is not going to understand that the spirits of his lineage are in *me*. He'd be like, 'A queer child with the family spirits? That's impossible!'" Maria was a lesbian woman in her late twenties. She was a member of feminist collective in Bulawayo and when we got to know one another she was in the middle of studying for a master's degree. Her activist stance was inspired by Black feminist thought and she often showed me books she was reading on the small screen of her phone by writers like Audre Lorde and bell hooks. Despite her education, she was from a low income family and had grown up in neighborhoods of Harare and

Bulawayo that others often described in menacing terms. Her father had been absent since she was two when he left her mother and returned to his rural home to take up the position of village chief, so she had been raised by a single mother who struggled to provide for her three children. Her father's role as chief meant that he was not only the head of his lineage, but also viewed himself as the ultimate authority on ancestral matters within the family. For Maria, her father had always been the embodiment of patriarchal and gerontocratic authority and the ultimate representative of "tradition." Her evolving feminist philosophy and interest in ancestral spirituality, however, meant that she became increasingly dubious about her father's assertions of spiritual authority.

Like Lindiwe and Hope, Maria often dreamt of snakes. Haunting dreams and visions had been a defining feature of her life from a young age and as she entered adulthood these experiences became harder to ignore. "When I was nineteen I started having visions of snakes—big snakes. There was one snake in particular that kept looking for me," she remembered. "There are these deep gutters on the side of the road in Magwegwe," she said, referring to her home neighborhood on the west side of Bulawayo. "I would feel it looking for me, lifting its head, going from house to house." As time went on, these dreams became overwhelming. "I couldn't say anything to anyone because I was so scared—it was so frightening," she explained. "I stopped eating. I think I only drank water for a week, and eventually my mum took me to Mpilo Hospital because she could see something was wrong." Maria spent more than a week in hospital and gradually recovered, but the dreams continued. "The night I was discharged I dreamt of a *huge* snake. It was as tall as the NRZ building in town," she said, referring to the tallest building in Bulawayo, a 23-story high-rise in the center of the city. "Then it started talking. It said, 'I've chosen you,' and I said, 'No, no, no—I'm too young! Choose someone else, please.' And it said,

'No, I've chosen *you*.' Then it tried to plead with me—this huge snake, which could have eaten me, was pleading with me."

Maria was deeply troubled by these experiences and sought help from many sources, ranging from hospitals and psychiatric facilities to pastors and prophetic healers. At one point, she was admitted to the city's psychiatric hospital, medicated, and given a diagnosis of schizophrenia.[12] For Maria, the extent of her troubles led her to continue seeking answers, and in the end *sangomas* provided the most compelling explanation for the specific details of her dreams and ailments. Not all of these experiences were positive, as we will see in the next chapter, but the *sangomas* Maria consulted with invariably heard about the snake and told her that it was the manifestation of a *khulu* or grandfather spirit. Moreover, they told her that the snake's size suggested it was a major spirit that she had inherited from her father and was likely responsible for the wellbeing of her entire lineage. "I got many translations for those dreams," Maria explained, referring to her consultations with *sangomas*. "Most of them would say, 'You have your father's ancestors.'" While such explanations tentatively gave meaning to her dreams, these answers were difficult for Maria to accept. "I would be like, 'What?! My father doesn't even care about me, there's no way I have his ancestors!'"

Maria had always had a fractured relationship with her father. Whereas she had a close relationship with her mother, being the last born of her three children, on her father's side she was the fourteenth of sixteen children. After he left her mother when she was two and returned to his rural village Maria rarely saw him. "My whole childhood I felt this hunger to have my Dad in my life," she recalled. At the age of nineteen, not long after her hospitalization, she travelled alone across the country in the hope of building a relationship with him. When she got to his

[12] For more on the history of psychiatry in Zimbabwe, see Lynette Jackson (2005).

village, however, she didn't get the welcome she was expecting. He asked, "Why did you come to find me after all this time? What do you want from me—money?" This was not the reunion Maria had envisaged throughout her childhood. Part of her suspected that he saw androgynous appearance and perceived her queerness and distanced himself from her because of it. She remembered leaving his village distraught, her head spinning as she hitchhiked home, and vowed to never speak to him again. As such, being told by a *sangoma* that anything connected her to her father didn't resonate with her relationship with him. "It was kind of a recurring theme," she said. "I would go to a *sangoma* and they would tell me I had to go to my father's rural area to talk with him about it, and I would get upset."

As we have seen, ancestral spirits are not only important to individuals but also have sway over the wellbeing of entire families. Elders who continue to practice ancestral spirituality typically believe they should mediate ancestors' wisdom and have input in ascertaining who has been chosen to act as their mediums. Moreover, for many older traditional practitioners, ancestral spirits are fundamentally collective. *Amadlozi* may choose to speak through a particular living individual, but their wisdom is meant to be for the benefit of all their descendants. While ancestral spirits can choose children and young people as their host, conventionally it is up to older people—and older men in particular—to determine which spirits are present and whether an individual should undergo training to become a *sangoma*.[13] For many elders, recognizing that power and authority are allotted along the lines of age is a practical matter due to the depth of their experience. If *amadlozi* become unhappy that things aren't being done correctly, many

[13] For ethnographic accounts of the "official" and "traditional" means of determining the presence of ancestral spirits in Shona cosmologies, see works by Kingsley Garbett (1963, 1969, 1977, 1992), Michael Gelfand (1959, 1962), Francis Machingura (2010), and Tabona Shoko (2007). There is a paucity of literature describing equivalent processes in Ndebele religious life, but for *sangoma* initiation practices in neighboring Botswana, see Wim Van Binsbergen (1991).

older *sangomas* told me, they can be capricious. When ancestors are displeased, they impose hardships on their descendants like poor rainfall, low fertility, and disease. For these reasons, elders' authority is not simply a matter of tradition, but essential for maintaining stable and productive relations with ancestors.

Over time, however, Maria gradually changed her perspective on how she understood her father's role in her spiritual journey. This shift was largely influenced by young queer people, who were refashioning themselves as better placed arbiters of ancestral authority. Particularly influential in Maria's changing perspective was her friendship with a lesbian *sangoma* named Fikile, who she became close to as she developed an interest in ancestral spirituality. When the two met, Fikile had recently finished her initiation to become a *sangoma*. "She had just *thwasa*-ed," Maria said, referring to the year-long initiation process people must undergo to become recognized and accredited *sangomas*. Through *ukuthwasa,* those with a calling come under the tutelage of an established *sangoma*.[14] Trainees learn about the use of different plant and animal medicines in healing and determine their spirits' distinctive skills, ultimately working to cultivate stronger relationships with each of their *amadlozi*. This process involves bringing the spirit "closer," enabling the host to discover key information about them—their names, their expertise, the clothes they need, the tools they require, their temperaments. *Ukuthwasa* helps formally initiate trainee *sangomas* into the institution of ancestral spirituality and serves to ensure the transmission of knowledge from established authority figures to younger neophytes. It is also necessary to *ukuthwasa* in order to become accredited with ZINATHA, the government agency that regulates traditional medicine and spirit mediumship. But while Fikile had undergone *ukuthwasa* herself, over time she began discouraging others from pursuing the same path.

[14] This recognized relationship, and adepts refer to their instructors as *gobelas*.

Instead, she advocated that young queer people think about their relationships with *amadlozi* as separate from either their relationships with living relatives or the formalized institution of ancestral spirituality as regulated by ZINATHA.

Fikile's perspective shaped her opinion of the role Maria's relatives ought to play in her spiritual journey. Fikile agreed with the *sangomas* Maria had consulted with that she had inherited the spirits of her father's lineage. But in Fikile's view, this didn't mean Maria needed her father's insights or blessing, but instead put Maria in a position of spiritual authority over her father: "You don't have to go to your father's rural area—they will look for you when the time comes," Fikile explained. "You are the one *they* need, not the other way around." Fikile told Maria she no longer needed to consult her family to ascertain information about her spirits, but also that she could depart from aspects of the established ways of doing things. For Fikile, the spirits themselves were the ultimate source of authority. From this perspective, *amadlozi* had resonances with the Pentecostal vision of God. As we will see further in the next chapter, young qyeer people like Fikile imagined *amadlozi* not as stern and distant authority figures, but as benevolent, caring, and personable beings who were the most significant authority figures. Just as young queer people employed their sense of having a personal relationship with God to reject aspects of their churches' teachings, Fikile framed ancestral spirits as more authoritative than either her living relatives or established *sangomas*. As such, she was selective about the people she allowed to mediate her relationships with spirits. As Fikile rearranged her understandings of spiritual authority, she reinvented key pillars of ancestral traditions: the temperament of *amadlozi* and the distinctive proximity elders have to ancestors.

Maria followed Fikile's advice, which was echoed by other queer friends who were pursuing ancestral spirituality. "For now I'm following my own path and learning more about

my *khulu*, the grandfather spirit, without telling my family," Maria said. She was inclined to trust Fikile's perspective over that of her living relatives. As she recalled, "It was the first time I went to consult with someone thought, 'This person can really help me because they're not going to try to get me a husband—for starters!—or try to rearrange my spiritual alignment somehow.'" As we will see in the next chapter, many established *sangomas* have complex views on gender and sexual expression, which means that queer people can have deeply uncomfortable experiences in their consulting rooms. In contrast, members of their own networks are less likely to view their queerness as related to their ancestral calling and can appreciate the complex relationships they have with their families. And as young queer people pursue ancestral spirituality, spirits mediate their relationships with their peers. "The spirits themselves can be close to one another and have relationships—between people or even within one person," Maria told me. As she and Fikile spent hours discussing ancestral spirituality with one another, their bond deepened. "I think my spirits and hers are close—my *khulu* shows himself to her. I dream for her and she dreams for me," Maria explained. At times, this dynamic made their relationship confusing to Maria. "Before I got to know Fikile I kind of had a crush on her," she admitted. "But now I understand that we work better as friends—I think I was drawn to her because of that spiritual link. We need each other, but our spirits need each other too."

The relationship Maria developed with Fikile paralleled that of Lindiwe and Zandile, who had been a couple for two years when I met them. We first encountered Lindiwe and Zandile in the introduction to the dissertation, when they discussed Lindiwe's dreams of snakes and their pursuit of interpretations for her dreams. At first they were unsure who to trust. They were enthusiastic members of a young Pentecostal congregation and their families had inculcated in them a fear of older relatives who might practice ancestral spirituality, as we saw at the

beginning of this chapter. But through queer networks in the city they learned of a trans *sangoma* named Thando, who like Fikile had undergone formal initiation and become a fully-fledged *sangoma* herself. Indeed, Lindiwe and Zandile's first face-to-face encounter with a *sangoma* undergoing spirit possession was with Thando. "When I spoke to Thando, she told me, 'Usually when you dream of snakes it's *amadlozi*,'" Lindiwe recalled. "She gave me various interpretations and told me I needed to cleanse them before I accept them." At first, this was the only information Lindiwe and Zandile had and they weren't entirely sure what to make of it. Why did Lindiwe's *amadlozi* need to be cleansed? How should they go about it? Overall, they came away from speaking with Thando convinced that they wanted to learn more about *amadlozi*, but unsure how to act next.

Over time, Lindiwe and Zandile came to have doubts about Thando's advice, however. "I think Thando's interpretations came out wrong, because I've done a lot of research on Twitter and I think my spirits are already pure," Lindiwe told me. "That would mean I don't need to cleanse them like Thando said." Lindiwe's words reflected the growing number of *sangomas* with large social media followings, many of them based in South Africa, who regularly post information about *amadlozi* and the signs of ancestral callings. As we

Figure 13. The image of a white snake that Lindiwe saw posted on Twitter by a South African *sangoma* named Gogo Ntomiyamanzi, which led her to re-evaluate Thando's advice. Screenshot by author.

spoke, Lindiwe pulled her phone out of her pocket and showed me an image that had been posted on Twitter by a South African *sangoma* a few days earlier (Fig. 13). “Do you see the color of the snake? The snake in my dream looked *exactly* like this one!,” she told me with excitement. “Actually this is Gogo Ntomiyamanzi, one of my favorite *sangomas*. From what she says I think my *amadlozi* have already been cleansed.” Zandile nodded in agreement and added, “I have a friend in South Africa—she’s queer too—and she told me some people don’t need to *thwasa*.” Like Fikile, Lindiwe and Zandile were skeptical of the need for formal initiation, which would put an older *sangoma* in a singular position of authority over them. But their skepticism towards Thando’s advice—which over time I would discover extended to Fikile as well—demonstrated that they didn’t see other young queer people as unproblematic sources of authority, either. While Fikile sought to position herself as a voice of authority on ancestral matters, there was a great degree of skepticism and suspicion among young queer people as some feared acquaintances might try to apprehend their powers for themselves, the kind of dynamic Gogo MaNcube warned Hope about in relation to her relatives. Instead, many of my interlocutors took a bricolage approach to ancestral spirituality, combining fragments of information and ideas from a variety of sources to address the problems they were most immediately grappling with. Social media in particular became a valuable source of advice, because it enabled them to seek out relevant information and follow advice that sent them in a direction they wanted to follow.

As in generations before, spirits mediate young queer people’s relationships with one another and their families, pulling some people closer together and pushing others further apart. Their spiritual journeys can drive a wedge in relationships and become a source of tension, cultivating suspicion and animosity between people. But for those like Maria and Fikile, or Lindiwe and Zandile, it cemented their bonds. Although it was Lindiwe’s dreams that prompted

them to undertake a quest for answers, over time Zandile came to feel she had a calling of her own. “It took me a long time to figure out precisely what gift I have,” she told me. “I tend to be able to interpret dreams, and I’m really good at interpreting her dreams,” she said, referring to Lindiwe. Indeed, Zandile felt her gift most strongly around Lindiwe. “I often know what her dreams mean before she does. It was only recently that I realized that my gift is dream interpretation—I just know what people’s dreams are trying to tell them.” As Zandile said, “You meet certain people and you go on a journey with them,” looking at Lindiwe. “Then you realize you probably met them for a reason.”

For established *sangomas* like Gogo MaNcube, however, perspectives that consider elders as problematic voices of authority were symptomatic of a more widespread and dangerous phenomenon. “The younger generation are starting to take shortcuts,” Gogo told me at our last meeting before I left Bulawayo. She was speaking of young people who approach ancestral spirits without the expert oversight of trained *sangomas* and knowledgeable elders like herself. Instead of carrying out the wide range of rites and rituals that ancestors demand, like rainmaking ceremonies and mortuary rites, young people were increasingly making contact with *amadlozi* haphazardly and on their own terms. In Gogo’s view, young people engaged with ancestors only when they wanted things and did so in unconventional ways, without the input of essential intermediary authority figures. To her mind this risked igniting the ire of ancestors and the results were already palpable: irregular rainfall and a recent death at a major rain shrine, Njelele, just outside the city. “People have to do things the proper way, go back to fundamental principles,” she explained. “Otherwise the ancestors will let us know they are not pleased.”

A century or more ago, a *sangoma* of Gogo MaNcube’s standing would have expected to wield considerable influence over a broad area, her spiritual authority widely acknowledged. So

too would Maria's father, the chief of a large region in the countryside. But in the present, Gogo had to work hard to persuade people to respect her expertise and follow her advice. Convincing young people that her way was correct was increasingly difficult, as many felt emboldened to trust their friends and peers over elders and forge individual spiritual trajectories in which they were guided by their relationship with God and personal aspirations rather than collective needs. The ancestral spirituality my interlocutors practiced was in many ways markedly different from that of Gogo MaNcube's generation. Not only did they selectively acknowledge elders' expertise and authority, but they utilized it to develop a stronger sense of self that led them further away from their families. As such, the spiritual journeys Maria, Fikile, Lindiwe, and Zandile pursued put distance between them and their kin. But as we shall see in the next chapter, these changes meant that ancestral spirits themselves might offer the type of intimate and supportive kin relations that young queer people crave, and as such to transform the kind of healing that ancestral spirituality promises.

Conclusion

Sitting in dappled sunlight in the garden of a sexual rights organization in a suburb of Bulawayo, Lindiwe was reflective. "I still feel like I'm on a journey of learning the traditional way of worshipping," she said. "Sometimes it feels like Holy Spirit is covering everything up—it's going to take time to unlearn those things I was taught." As we've seen, Lindiwe's embrace of ancestral spirituality served to challenge elders' authority and reconfigure her kinship relations. In childhood, Lindiwe's mother had hoped that by making her fearful of her grandmother she had foreclosed the possibility of her daughter ever engaging in ancestral practices. "She doesn't really know about the traditional stuff I'm doing," Lindiwe told me. "But

sometimes when I go home she plays loud sermons about ancestors being demons," she explained, raising her eyebrows. "She doesn't want me to forget." But Lindiwe felt she had no reason to take her mother's attempts to assert spiritual authority seriously anymore, given that she had maligned and belittled her own mother. Lindiwe's new perspective—spurred by a reevaluation of dynamics within her family and a gnawing sense there was more to her experiences than she could grasp—led her to revise her understanding of her grandmother. "The sad thing is my grandmother passed away last year so she never knew about my journey," she explained. "She was looking for me, and I think it's because she knew I had inherited her gifts. There are a lot of questions I have about her I can't answer," she said.

Equipped with these kinds of unresolved questions, young people like Maria and Hope initially turn to other relatives and established *sangomas* for guidance. But as Gogo MaNcube's concerns attest, elders are often disappointed to discover that young people don't always heed their advice, and over time often come to see themselves as masters of their own destiny. Lindiwe's story, like those of Hope and Maria, reveals how the intergenerational tug of war over ancestral knowledge cuts across families, pulling some relations apart while drawing others closer together. It underscores not only that kinship relations are always in motion, but also that shifting battles over spiritual authority have a key role in shaping kinship ties. Lindiwe's relationship with Zandile suggests that while the ancestral spirituality that young queer people pursue is less oriented towards traditional kinship networks it nonetheless enables them to forge new types of relationships. In the process, they begin to reimagine the substance of kinship not as grounded in norms of seniority, heterosexual monogamy, and biological reproduction, but in ideas about care, acceptance, and reciprocity. This opens up the possibility for new types of kinship relations—with peers, but also with ancestral spirits themselves. As we shall see in the

next chapter, in reworking the spiritual practices of their forefathers into new theological imaginations, young queer Zimbabweans develop new forms of queer kinship practices with *amadlozi*.

Chapter 4

Unexpected Callings:

Queering Kinship and Healing through Ancestral Theologies

"I rejected my calling for a long, long time," Maria told me. "When you're LGBTI in Zimbabwe, you're taken to healers and prophets to try to 'fix' you over and over again." Maria was recalling her encounters with a revolving cast of *sangomas*, or traditional healers, throughout her teenage years and early adulthood, an experience that's common among young queer people in Bulawayo. Although my interlocutors' parents are mainly "full time" Christians, many discover that—when confronted with their child's gender transgression—their spiritual allegiances are often more complex. Maria became aware of this when she was fifteen and her mother decided she was too masculine for a teenage girl, refusing to wear skirts or dresses and slouching too much, and she tried to force her towards a more normative gender expression. After exhausting a series of Christian churches and pastors—first her own Dutch Reformed congregation, then a number of independent prophets—her mother eventually sought out a *sangoma* to resolve what she had come to perceive as a spiritual problem with "an ancestral link," as Maria put it.

"Then it began," Maria went on. "They take you to so-and-so, some healer who's apparently 'cured' people in the past," she said, the cynicism clear in her voice. In these encounters, Maria explained, *sangomas* frequently attributed her queerness to the presence of an ancestral spirit of the opposite gender who had chosen her as their host. As we have seen, historically *amadlozi* singled out certain descendants to act as their mediums and communicate

with members of their lineage, who were destined to become *sangomas* in their own right. These spirits were understood to exert an especially powerful influence over the lives of their *sangoma* mediums, affecting everything from their diet to their mannerisms, their dress to their intimate desires. As such, gender expression and sexual orientation could be influenced by the presence of one or more *amadlozi*. Maria encountered this framework for interpreting queerness when her mother took her to consult with *sangomas* throughout her adolescence. "She took me to this one guy and he was like, *'There's something about you,'"* Maria said, laughing as she impersonated the *sangoma's* mysterious tone. "I remember another woman was like, 'I'm seeing a *khulu*, a grandfather spirit,' and I had no idea what she was talking about." Like many young queer people in Bulawayo, Maria found visiting *sangomas* during her teenage years both confusing and unsettling. She'd had little exposure to ancestral cosmologies growing up and had no framework for interpreting their suggestions. Moreover, their explanations didn't concur with her lived experience or nascent awareness of her sexuality and she dismissed the interpretations they provided.

By the time we met, however, Maria described the presence of ancestral spirits in her life in vivid and visceral terms. "I've accepted my calling," she said. "Like, I just realized that this thing is not going away, it's real—it's got a heartbeat, limbs—and I have to accept that my ancestors have chosen me, somehow." In the end, Maria did find a form of healing through ancestral spirits, just one very different to the kind envisaged by her mother. In the last chapter, we saw how Fikile helped Maria minimize her father's role in her spiritual journey. Since that time, Maria built strong and meaningful relationships with her ancestral spirits, particularly the *khulu* or grandfather spirit that the *sangoma* had mentioned to her as a teenager. Whereas her mother imagined that ancestral healing would result in the altering of her gender expression,

however, Maria found healing of a different kind: the sense of acceptance, protection, and understanding she experienced in her relationships with spirits. Moreover, the spirits' presence reinforced her belief that her gender and sexual identity were not subject to change, but rather were innate and unchangeable. Over time, as her relationship with her mother frayed, ancestral spirits came to occupy an increasingly central role in her life. Maria was just one of a growing number of young queer people in Bulawayo who were discovering that the world of ancestral spirituality—a domain they encountered through their parents' efforts to alter their gender expression—might ultimately offer new experiences of kinship.

In this chapter, I show that innovative kinship practices are at the heart of young queer people's embrace of ancestral spirituality and articulations of localized expressions of queerness in Zimbabwe. As we have seen, political and religious elites across Africa have frequently framed queerness and Africanness as fundamentally incompatible (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015b; Takabvakure, 2015). In light of this, a central problematic in queer African studies has been to find ways of countering these assertions while grappling with the paucity of precolonial sources and the contingency of Western categories of gender and sexual identity (Epprecht, 2004; Hoad, 2007; Matebeni, 2014).[1] Recent scholarship has sought to articulate an African approach to queer studies by highlighting efforts to identify "usable traditions" among queer people in a range of countries (Livermon, 2015; Macharia, 2015; Migraine-George & Currier, 2016; Mupotsa et al., 2020; Qambela, 2017). While some young queer Zimbabweans are interested in historical questions regarding such queer "traditions," I suggest that the appeal of ancestral spirituality is

[1] This endeavor reflects a broader question in queer studies regarding contemporary sexual taxonomies and their potential to inflict forms of "epistemic violence" when applied cross-culturally and trans-historically (Ahmed, 2006; Gill, 2018a; Massad, 2002; Puar, 2011; Sedgwick, 1990; Strongman, 2002).

grounded in distinctively queer practices of kinship that manifest in their relations with ancestral spirits.

The idiom of kinship has had a vexed history in queer studies, however. Classical anthropological accounts of kinship hinged on two primary forms of relatedness: consanguinity—relation through blood—and affinity, or relation through marriage (Fortes, 1949; Lévi-Strauss, 1971; L. H. Morgan, 1871; Radcliffe-Brown, 1950).[2] The site where consanguinity and affinity came together was heterosexual reproduction, which meant that queerness—understood as either gender or sexual transgression—was implicitly framed as a departure from kinship (Ramberg, 2013). Subsequent critics argued that kinship was not simply created by marriage and reproduction, but rather that it was cumulatively constructed through acts of care, sustenance, and co-habitation (Borneman, 1997; Carsten, 1997; Franklin, 2013; Strathern, 1992).[3] These perspectives made accounts of queer kinship possible, most influentially in Kath Weston's landmark *Families We Choose* (1991) in which she documented how gays and lesbians in the United States created "chosen families" that were often stronger and more durable than their ties with natal kin. Ultimately, Weston showed that queer people were not "exiles from kinship" but rather that kinship practices were intrinsic to queer life (see also Morison et al., 2018).

In recent years, however, scholars in queer studies have questioned whether it will ever be possible to fully dissociate kinship from core heteronormative assumptions, namely heterosexual reproduction, the couple form, and normative expressions of gender (Berlant, 1998; Berlant &

[2] As later studies pointed out, these accounts of kinship were rooted in Western idioms of kinship as a matter of blood and biology. For critiques of early studies of kinship, see the work of David Schneider (1968, 1984) and Janet Carsten (2000, 2004).

[3] More recently, Marshall Sahlins (2013) has sought to resolve this issues by defining kinship as "mutuality of being." While this definition has many merits, its drawback is its inattentiveness to the frictions that kinship often entails, which other authors have highlighted (Mody, 2020; Peletz, 2001).

Warner, 1998; Hoad, 2007; B. Horton, 2018; Mupotsa et al., 2020).[4] These scholars argue that the lens of kinship inherently centers and reproduces the significance of these types of relations above other forms of intimate attachment; as Keguro Macharia has stated, "I remain convinced that kinship refuses forms of intimate innovation" (2019, p. 7). With these critiques in mind, I suggest that my interlocutors' relationships with ancestral spirits demonstrate that there remain things to be recuperated from the idiom kinship in queer studies. Specifically, I contend that young queer Zimbabweans' relationships with ancestral spirits reveal distinctively queer modes of practicing kinship that simultaneously unsettle heterosexual reproduction, the couple form, and normative articulations of gender. Young queer Zimbabweans creatively reimagine ancestral kinship ties—the foundational form of genealogical relatedness in Southern Africa—to simultaneously fulfill their own desires and reject the use of ancestral epistemologies to undermine them. Ultimately, I suggest, their engagements with ancestral spirits involve a specific form of "chosen family," one that disrupts normative assumptions about both kinship and choice.

In this chapter, I show how Maria and other young queer people in Bulawayo employ queer practices of kinship to resist their parents' efforts to heal them and transform ancestral spirituality into a space to heal themselves. In the first part of the chapter, I describe competing accounts of "traditional" or "indigenous" perspectives on queerness that exist in contemporary Zimbabwe. These frameworks account for why many young queer people encounter pathologizing ideas about queerness when their parents turn to *sangomas* to find healing for them in adolescence, who tend to frame queerness as a problem to be solved. Young queer people

[4] This speaks to the broader impetus of queer studies to interrogate normalized subject positions—male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, married and single, natural and perverse (Eng et al., 2005)—which are also intertwined with idioms of kinship. The use of the term "queer" is designed to move beyond discrete taxonomies and examine ways of being in the world that transcend the normalizing logics of categories.

overwhelmingly reject the notion that ancestral spirits cause gender transgression or same-sex desires, which imply that central aspects of their lived experiences are caused by external forces and subject to change. Instead, they embrace and recontextualize the identity categories of the global gay rights movement, emphasizing the notion of fixed sexual identity as a means of refusing efforts to alter their gender and sexual expression. Next, I examine the models of choice operative in relations with ancestral spirits, which contrast with the one typically associated with "chosen families" in the West. Finally, I describe the qualities of the kinship that my interlocutors cultivate in their relationships with spirits, which ultimately enables them to reframe understandings of healing and queerness within ancestral epistemologies and articulate novel queer theologies.

Debating "Traditional" Sexual Epistemologies

"You know those old guys who sit at Imakethe—the *okhulu*, the grandfathers?," Awande asked me.[5] We first met Awande when she recounted her journey departure from Catholicism and embrace of Pentecostalism at the beginning of Chapter 2. As we saw at the end of that chapter, Awande eventually moved away from Pentecostal churches and developed a more idiosyncratic spiritual outlook. As her spiritual journey became open-ended, she came to be intrigued by ancestral practices and discerned parallels between the Catholic faith of her childhood, the Pentecostal orientations of her early adulthood, and the epistemologies of ancestral practitioners. She was particularly attentive to the perspectives of older traditionalists, especially their accounts of precolonial cosmologies relating to gender and sexuality. To Awande, the outlook of older ancestral practitioners demonstrated that queerness had deep roots

[5] Imakethe is a pseudonym.

in Zimbabwe.

When Awande described the old men at Imakethe, she invoked a scene familiar to many in Bulawayo. Imakethe is the city's fabled market that lies between Bulawayo's oldest high-density suburbs, Makokoba and Mzilikazi. It's famous for selling traditional medicines, foods, and clothes, and is packed with stalls piled high with boxes containing roots, tree barks, seeds, bones, and animal hides. The stalls are mostly operated by the kinds of older men and women Awande described, many of whom wear subtle signs that they practice *amasiko*, a word that conveys the broad nexus of Zimbabwean customs that are considered "traditional."[6] Some carry *induku,* small ornamental walking sticks modelled after knobkerries, while others wear brass bangles or strings of beads signifying the presence of distinctive ancestral spirits—red for *abanzingele* or hunter spirits, blue for *injuzi* or water spirits, white and black for *isangoma*, literally "the ones who sing," the most powerful ancestral spirits with the gift of healing. For many in Bulawayo, Imakethe is tightly bound up with ideas about traditional culture and those who represent it.

"You've probably seen those guys—they're always there," Awande continued, describing the older men who sit on the curbside near Imakethe. "One time I was walking by on my way to see a friend in Mzilikazi and I heard one of them mutter, 'I'm seeing an old man in this one—that who's leading her,' and the guys he's with nod and agree." Awande went on, analyzing what the men at Imakethe meant when they said they saw a man "leading" her. "They see the queerness in me, walking kind of like a man. And that's how they explain it—that a grandfather spirit is leading me. To them it's normal," she told me. In this account, Awande referenced the profound ways in which ancestral spirits affect their hosts' lives. Each *idlozi* or singular ancestral spirit is as complex as a living person. They have names and relatives and strong personalities,

[6] As mentioned in the introduction, I use the term "traditional" to reflect everyday usage of the word in Zimbabwe, with critiques of the idea of tradition in mind (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

complete with idiosyncratic likes and dislikes, needs and wants. As they become present in their host's life, *amadlozi* can mold their personality, emotions, and even their experience of themselves. As Awande's encounter at Imakethe suggested, gender transgression and same-sex desires are within the scope of things that *amadlozi* can influence in their host. As such, queerness can be interpreted as indicative of the presence of a powerful spirit, which affects who their host is attracted to and how they express their gender.

Awande's telling of these elders' perspectives is in stark contrast to the discourses of gender and sexuality that permeate the Zimbabwean public sphere. As we have seen, former president Robert Mugabe was one of the most prominent voices propagating a homophobic genre of political rhetoric on the grounds of preserving "traditional" culture. But he was far from the only such voice who claimed that homosexuality was a colonial import with no antecedent in African societies. For instance, Pathisa Nyathi—one of the most eminent scholars of Ndebele culture—is Mugabe's political opposite in almost every sense. Nyathi has worked tirelessly to counter the political and social marginalization of Ndebele culture within Zimbabwe by documenting, preserving, and promoting oral histories of Zimbabwean elders, and has published numerous books and articles on the country's indigenous cultures (2005, 2007). But like Mugabe, he has also asserted that same-sex intimacies are part of a "Western lifestyle" (Mrewa, 2019) and argued that African culture values sexual unions only so far as they produce children (N. Moyo, 2017). Although he advances these views on the grounds of minority cultural preservation, his writings have had a similar effect of monopolizing understandings of the past and undermining possibilities for queer life in the present. Indeed, his subject position as an Ndebele scholar lends his work an aura of unassailable authority in Bulawayo.

Arguments like these are premised on particular imaginings of kinship and the past, which

Keguro Macharia (2019) has termed the "genealogical imperative."[7] The genealogical imperative is the theoretical underpinning of classical studies of kinship, which reified affinity and consanguinity as the basis of kinship.[8] As Macharia describes, in the mid-twentieth century a cohort of African scholars emerged who sought to mount a response to colonial stereotypes of African societies, particularly the demonization of African religious life and family structure. This varied group of scholars included the likes of Kenyan statesman Jomo Kenyatta (1965), theologian John Mbiti (1969), and the psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon (1952). With different ends in mind, these scholars argued that the value of African culture lay in part in the strength and endurance of its heterosexual kinship systems, reifying heterosexual intimacies as the authentic foundation of African family and social structure.[9] Moreover, they implied that once Africans were free from colonialism these institutions would be key touchstones for building postcolonial societies. Nyathi's writings can be read as a descendant of these approaches, and his work embodies a similar desire to counter colonial attitudes to African kinship.[10] While Nyathi's work is subtle in its attention to Zimbabwe's ethnic heterogeneity, he reproduces the genealogical imperative in privileging reproductive heterosexuality and blood descent as the structuring principles of African society. As an authority on traditional culture, his

[7] Macharia draws the notion of the genealogical imperative from Elizabeth Povinelli's (2005) account of the genealogical society, which forms a counterpoint to her concept of the autological subject. In Povinelli's work, both of these concepts are discursive fictions that produce particular types of subjects and societies.

[8] Many foundational works of Africanist anthropology posited kinship as the bedrock of social, political, and religious life, notably the work of E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1966), Meyer Fortes (1953), and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952).

[9] Specifically, these scholars sought to challenge colonial accounts of African family structures as dysfunctional and immoral while also troubling the functionalism of anthropological accounts. They often focused on institutions like bridewealth and polygamous marriage, approaching them not in terms of their functional role in society but with a view to demonstrating their inherent worth. While these figures positioned themselves as distinct from European anthropologists, many borrowed the ethnographic methods and modes of analysis of anthropological studies.

[10] Nyathi stresses Zimbabwe's "kaleidoscopic cultural landscape" (2005, p. 1) and seeks to nuance some of the caricatures of Ndebele culture as both non-autochthonous and violent that we encountered in Chapter 1, and is an important voice challenging the notion that Zimbabwe is or ought to be a Shona ethno-state (Ranger, 2004).

work leverages certain accounts of the past to reproduce ideas about the "foreignness" of queer intimacies and gender transgression.

While Nyathi is an high-profile figure in Bulawayo, Awande's experiences with the elders at Imakethe illustrate that his views are not representative of all Ndebele elders. Indeed, there exists considerable diversity among elders regarding understandings of gender transgression and same-sex intimacies, both in their tellings of the past and their understandings today. Awande's account demonstrates that some elders view gender transgression not as a reflection of colonial or contemporary influences on Zimbabwean culture, but rather as an indication of the presence of an ancient ancestral spirit. Others have heard these sentiments even more frequently than Awande. "The elders in my family often say that," Thando concurred. Thando is a transwoman in her early twenties who discovered she had ancestral spirits several years before we met. She grew up in a poorer family on the outskirts of Bulawayo and many in her family had enduring rural connections that led them to frequently participate in ancestral rituals. Unlike the parents of other interlocutors, Thando's relatives saw ancestral practices as compatible with Christianity and the family held regular ceremonies to collectively engage with their lineage's ancestral spirits. When she began struggling with health and personal problems in her late teenage years, she consulted with a *sangoma* who determined that Thando had an ancestral calling. Specifically, the *sangoma* told her that she had three powerful *gogos* or grandmother spirits, who were gifted healers. Following several consultations and a prolonged period of uncertainty and indecision, Thando decided to undergo the initiation process known as *ukuthwasa*, and after a year of training she became a *sangoma* in her own right. She told me that since her initiation, many members of her family had begun to interpret her trans identity through the lens of ancestral spirits. "My dad just says, 'For my son to be like this, it must be those grandmother spirits that

are always in front,'" Thando said. "For him, that's why I dress like a woman, that's why I'm transgender," she told me. This framing was more intuitive for her father than English language identity categories, she explained. "He doesn't understand this word, 'transgender.' He's never heard of it. To him it's the grandmother spirits—that makes sense to him and he accepts it." For Thando's father, this interpretation reflected the potency of the spirits she had inherited, transforming what others may perceive as a subversive act of gender transgression into a symbol of Thando's spiritual gifts.

The views of older traditional practitioners like Thando's father or the elders at Imakethe challenge the claims of either politicians like Mugabe or scholars like Nyathi to provide a singular account of precolonial understandings of gender and intimate life.[11] Indeed, there is no singular "authentic" indigenous understanding of queerness or view among contemporary elders, partly because precolonial societies didn't conceive of gender and sexuality in identitarian terms (Amadiume, 1987; Hoad, 2007). Moreover, while there are hegemonic epistemologies of sexuality in the contemporary moment, these discourses are never totalizing and there remain an abundance of "unrationalized" counter-narratives that rub up against them (Sedgwick, 1999).[12] But while the existence of alternative understandings of queerness provide a counterpoint to arguments that same-sex intimacies are Western or colonial imports, they have uneven and sometimes detrimental effects on young queer people. Although they appear to pave the way for

[11] The perspectives conveyed by Awande and Thando are also reflected in the work of scholars who sought to counter homophobic political rhetoric. For instance, Marc Epprecht states, "What we today would term homosexual orientation or transgender identity was not necessarily an offense at all by a respected attribute if caused by certain types of spirit possession and manifested in certain ways… [including] possession by benign spirits of the opposite sex" (2004, p. 35). As we shall see, these kinds of approaches have been criticized by a number of scholars on the grounds that they import Western premises about identity, selfhood, gender, and sexuality, while neglecting to fully understand African models of personhood and sociality.

[12] Sedgwick's approach emphasizes historical heterogeneity of this kind. In her words, "I have tended […] not to stress the alterity of disappeared or now-supposed-alien understandings of same-sex relations but instead to invest attention in those unexpectedly plural, varied, and contradictory historical understandings whose residual—indeed, whose renewed—force seems most palpable today" (1990, p. 47).

benevolent or even valorizing understandings of queerness—in which gender transgression might indicate spiritual aptitudes that others lack—they rarely reflect young queer people's experiences of themselves. As Maria's experiences at the beginning of this chapter suggest, in many cases these accounts serve to reinforce pathologizing interpretations of queerness, in which gender expression can and potentially should be altered. In doing so, they imply that intrinsic aspects of the lived experience of queer people—gender fluidity, same-sex desires, and their very ways of being in the world—are produced by the presence of a spirit and in that sense external to them. But perhaps most consequentially, these accounts often entail visions of healing that young queer people find deeply distressing.

Parental Quests for "Healing"

"Have you seen how scary it is?," Isaki asked me, taking a long drag on his cigarette as we sat in the sunshine outside a bar in the middle of Bulawayo. Isaki was a thirty-year-old transman who worked as a nurse in government clinics in Zimbabwe's rural provinces but had grown up in the city. Describing his memories of the first time he was taken to consult with a *sangoma*, Isaki went on, "They're all dressed up—with those feathered hats and the beads and the bones—ahh, scary!" Isaki recalled his first image of a *sangoma* as a deeply menacing figure, the kind of person he'd been taught by his Christian parents to avoid his whole life. He continued, "They'll be snuffing—you know, snorting tobacco or *mbanje* (marijuana)," describing the process a *sangoma* undertakes to enter trance, the kind we witnessed during Hope's consultation with Gogo MaNcube in the previous chapter. Isaki blew his cigarette smoke towards the sky, shaking his head. "Then the spirit enters them they start shaking and talking in this creepy voice," Isaki said, recalling the point in the consultation when the *sangoma* begins to speak as their ancestral

spirit, a voice quite different to their natural tone. “Honestly, it’s terrifying,” he told me, tapping the ash from the end of his cigarette. “I’ve never wanted to get out of a room so fast.”

For young people like Isaki, being taken to consult with a *sangoma* is often both intimidating and distressing. As we’ve seen, many young people were raised in Christian homes and instructed by their parents and wider communities to be fearful of ancestral spirituality and those who practice it. Many had learned that ancestral spirituality was tantamount to witchcraft and that engaging with it put them and the people they cared about at risk. The ostensible consensus that ancestral practices are dangerous and demonic belies a more complex reality, however (Biri, 2011). While many Zimbabweans eschew open participation in ancestral spirituality, many consider consulting with a *sangoma* if other avenues—such as churches, priests, pastors, prophets, herbalists, and biomedical doctors—fail, reflecting Zimbabwe’s polyontological spiritual landscape (McIntosh, 2019). Usually, people turn to *sangomas* when they suspect the issue in question has an “ancestral link” of some kind, to borrow the words of Maria’s mother in the opening to this chapter. One such “problem,” as Isaki discovered, is gender transgression and perceived same-sex desires. To learn that his apparently unwavering Christian parents—who taught him to avoid ancestral practitioners at all costs—not only considered consulting with a *sangoma* but would take their own child to one came as a shock.

As he took another drag on his cigarette, Isaki remembered the conversation he had with the *sangoma’s* ancestral spirit while she was in trance. “She mostly asked about my dreams,” Isaki said. “I told them I’d been dreaming a lot about my grandfather. He died a few years ago, but in my dreams he’s often there, walking with a snake.” At this point in the consultation Isaki remembered that his father interjected, “Oh, you’ve got a male ancestor!” Isaki was surprised—amused, even—to discover that his father knew more about ancestral spirituality than he’d

realized. “My Dad actually knew what the snake meant!,” he said with a look of amazement. For Isaki, this moment undid many of the dynamics of secrecy that had surrounded ancestral spirituality throughout his childhood and he encountered a previously unknown side of his father. As we saw with Bernard’s family in the previous chapter, secrecy and suspicion characterize the dynamics relating to both spirits and sexuality in many Zimbabwean families. As such, this moment entailed a kind of mutual coming out as his father grappled with his trans identity and he processed his father’s knowledge of ancestral spirituality. “The *sangoma* agreed,” Isaki continued. “She said, ‘Your grandfather’s *in* you, he has a gift for you.’” As with Awande and Thando above, these explanations made sense to Isaki’s older family members. “My family believe it,” he told me. “They actually believe I have special powers because of it! It’s kind of funny to me. Whenever they have a traditional event they ask me to come over,” he explained. While Isaki spoke of these experiences with irreverence, he was nonetheless wounded by the notion that this encounter with a *sangoma* was framed as an act of care in the pursuit of healing. Taking a young person to consult with a *sangoma* implies a need for healing because in the broadest sense *sangomas* are healers . Anthropological literature on *sangomas* and ancestral spirits almost always approaches them from the vantagepoint “traditional medicine,” and the most common English-language translation for *sangoma*—traditional healer—underscores this association (Comaroff, 1980; Decoteau, 2013; Livingston, 2005; Ngubane, 1977; Thornton, 2017; Turner, 1968; Van Dijk et al., 2000).[13] But the healing that *sangomas* undertake is not limited to physical ailments, as in Western biomedicine, but also includes adjusting the mind, mending relationships between people, and improving relations between humans and spirits

[13] As discussed in Chapter 1 (fn. 1), the other common translation for *sangoma* is “witch doctor,” which was favored by early colonial writers and is still used by many Pentecostals today. This term similarly draws a parallel with Western biomedicine but also incorporates the specter of witchcraft.

(Langwick, 2011; Mukonyora, 2007). When a parent brings their queer child to consult, *sangomas* often face pressure from parents to alter their children's gender expression. As we have seen, in some cases the spirit might be viewed as a sign of a spiritual gift, as it was for Thando's father. But even if the spirit is interpreted as benevolent, many *sangomas* suggest the possibility of negotiating with the *idlozi* or asking it to choose another host. While *amadlozi* are understood to be domineering and stubborn, unwavering in their choice of host, they are also viewed as amenable to reason under certain circumstances. As such, *sangomas* suggest it is sometimes possible to persuade the spirit to choose another host to allow the person in question to inhabit a more normalized gender expression and make possible things like heterosexual marriage and childbearing. In other cases, however, queerness is interpreted as a type of curse caused by the presence of a malevolent spirit.[14]

Having made such a diagnosis, *sangomas* offer various kinds of "cleansing" remedies, and it is the healing practices that they employ that are particularly distressing to young queer people. We met Danny in Chapter 2, when he recalled his Pentecostal pastor's selective preaching on sexuality that appeared to be designed to single him out. Like many of my interlocutors, Danny not only experienced attempts to alter his sexuality in Christian spaces, but also among ancestral practitioners. He remembered a time when the mother of a close friend who was also gay became determined to find a *sangoma* who would alter their gender expression. "If she heard about a powerful *sangoma* anywhere in the city she'd take us to see them—Makokoba, Mzilikazi, Cowdray Park—all over," Danny said, referring to neighborhoods in Bulawayo that are known

[14] These kinds of analyses parallel certain Christian approaches, which can frame queerness as the manifestation of a curse or "evil spirit." Such approaches are most common in Pentecostal churches, where pastors regularly "deliver" congregants from a range of curses, an experience many of my interlocutors recalled. For more on Christian and specifically Pentecostal attitudes to same-sex intimacies, see Frida Lyonga (2016), Melissa Hackman (2018), Nathaniel Homewood (2016a, 2021), and Naomi Richman (2021).

to be home to many traditional practitioners. He went on, “Those trips were terrifying. Many of the *sangomas* had razors and they’d cut us—it was so scary and disgusting.” Danny described the practice of *ukugcaba*, where *sangomas* use razorblades to make small incisions in the skin and rub powders or herbs into the wound with a view to remedying a specific ailment. *Ukugcaba* is a practice that several of my interlocutors remembered and found particularly upsetting. “We’d sit there and let them do it,” Danny explained, “But of course is didn’t change anything inside us.”

I heard about these kinds of experiences from many of my interlocutors, who described their visits to *sangomas* as simultaneously embarrassing, intimidating, and physically unpleasant. Sipho similarly encountered ancestral explanations for queerness on one of many visits he made with his mother to *sangomas* in his adolescence. Sipho was a twenty-three-year-old gay man who worked for a sexual rights organization in Bulawayo, and like Danny was subject to cleansing rituals aimed at altering his gender expression. “They would always tell me it’s a grandmother spirit who’s making me this way, she’s too ‘at the front,’” Sipho recalled. “They told the spirit, ‘The person you have chosen is a boy, let him be normal. Let the grandfather spirits have more space and come to the front.’” Sipho endured many attempts to alter his gender expression in the hope of placating his mother. “They’ll tell you to buy this oil, bathe in this concoction, drink these herbs with your tea—do all of this and then the spirit will stop misbehaving.” His most visceral memory was of a ritual that involved bathing in chicken blood, which the *sangoma* told his mother would placate his ancestral spirits and in turn alter his desires. “It was horrible. I think I’m still traumatized by that,” Sipho said. “When we went back a month later, I said I had changed because I needed them to stop. But of course it didn’t work—

I'm still gay. I always hoped that if I let them try enough times, maybe they would eventually accept that this is how I am."

Young queer people's visits to *sangomas* in the company of their parents are almost invariably unpleasant and unsettling experiences. They illustrate the vast distance between children and their parents when it comes to both perceptions of care and understandings of queerness (Mody, 2020). In the end, their parents' efforts often create distance in their relationships with their children, further complicating the already fraught kinship dynamics we observed in the previous chapter. Moreover, when young queer Zimbabweans are presented with ancestral frameworks for interpreting gender transgression and same-sex desires, they almost universally dismiss them. Danny summed up his views on such perspectives, stating, "In my opinion there are *sangomas* who lie and say, 'This one has a grandmother in him, that's why he's acting like a woman.' It's all a lie—I've never believed that." As such, these experiences serve to deepen young queer Zimbabweans' attachments to identity-based idioms of gender and sexual identity, which they often embrace and promote in forceful terms. The notion of the fixity of gender and sexual identity that they encounter through sexual rights organizations becomes a particularly powerful tool for rebutting these attempts at spiritual healing. But as we shall see, embracing identities categories doesn't foreclose their interest in ancestral cosmologies entirely.

Fixing Sexual Taxonomies

The identity categories of the global gay rights movement overlay the diversity of "indigenous" perspectives on queerness that we encountered above. For many scholars in queer studies, the fact that the LGBTQ framework has its origins in Western thought makes its cross-cultural use problematic (Altman, 2001; Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan IV, 2002; Puar, 2007). For

instance, Joseph Massad contended that the global gay rights movement—which he disparagingly termed the "Gay International"—sought to recruit diverse subjects into gendered and sexualized categories that do not align with their lived experiences. In doing so, he argued, gay rights activists marginalized "those cultural formations… not based on the hetero-homo binary," and ultimately perpetuated forms of "epistemic, ethical, and political violence" (2008, p. 40). Likewise, Neville Hoad criticized scholars of African sexualities for imposing alien sexual taxonomies, arguing, "An identity politics of sameness, literally of appropriative identification, is potentially as harmful as the fetishizable difference of exoticism" (ibid., p. xxv). But as we have seen, so-called "traditional" perspectives on same-sex intimacies do not necessarily accord with young queer people's experiences of themselves. Moreover, the greatest evangelists for Western categories of gender and sexuality in Zimbabwe are almost invariably young queer people themselves.

"When I learned the word 'gay' for the first time I thought, 'Oh, that's interesting,'" Sipho recalled. "It was the first time I knew there was this word for me that wasn't always bad. I like to say it healed me." Sipho was about fifteen when he first heard this word, which was in fact shouted at him by a schoolmate as an insult. But although his classmate used the term as a slur, for Sipho this English-language term had a different valence to the Ndebele and Shona terms he'd heard before. As he explained, the terms that describe queerness in Zimbabwe's indigenous languages are almost universally pejorative. The closest equivalents to the English word "gay" are the Ndebele word *stabane* and the Shona term *hungochani*. These terms allude to male same-sex practices, emphasizing perceived failures to achieve normative masculinity (Parpart, 2007).[15] Moreover, they are almost exclusively used as slurs. In our conversations, my interlocutors only

[15] These words specifically refer to queer men; queer women are generally described as "tom boys" or other euphemistic terms.

ever mentioned these terms hesitatingly and in lowered voices, because they are the kinds of words that have the power to wound and are rarely spoken by queer people themselves. As Sipho explained, "When it's a local language it's so disturbing to be honest with you. People only use those words to throw hate at people. Many of us can't hear those words without feeling like someone is attacking us."

As Sipho's account suggests, young queer Zimbabweans don't see any avenue for reclaiming or reappropriating indigenous terms. Instead, they overwhelmingly prefer English-language words for describing gender and sexual identity. As we shall see, however, they don't passively take up these idioms from the outside but leverage them to respond to their context. On a sunny day in September, I attended a workshop for young queer people on "SOGIE," an acronym that stands for "sexual orientation, gender identity and expression." The participants in this workshop were mostly in their twenties and had encountered a patchwork of English-language gender and sexual taxonomies through print and social media growing up, particularly those like lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Many had socialized with other queer people for months prior to this day, so had a working knowledge of English-language terms for gender and sexuality. But this workshop was designed to nuance how they thought about their own sexual and gender identities. Specifically, the workshop employed pedagogical tool known as the "Genderbread Person," a worksheet that prompted users to reflect on their gender and sexual identities along four vectors: gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation (Fig. 14).[16] Anesu, the workshop convener, defined each of these categories for the workshop participants and explained that they may not go together in ways they might assume.

[16] The Genderbread Person is an open-access worksheet that is continuously revised to reflect evolving understandings of gender and sexuality, often changing quite radically.

"Your gender identity may not be the same as your gender expression. It may have nothing to do with who you're attracted to; these things are all separate," Anesu explained.

When faced with the worksheet, many participants struggled to grasp the fine-grained semantics of the English-language distinctions. While some had undertaken university education in English, others had more limited English vocabularies and found it difficult to make sense of nuanced differentiations. The placement of "genderqueer" between woman and man was intuitive to most. But the semantic distinctions between "genderqueer" and "androgynous," which the worksheet aligned with gender identity and expression respectively, was much less clear. "I… I don't get it," one participant said. "Are they not the same?". Anesu responded to this question using the worksheet's language. "If you are genderqueer, your gender identity is somewhere between a man and a woman. If you are androgynous, your gender expression is

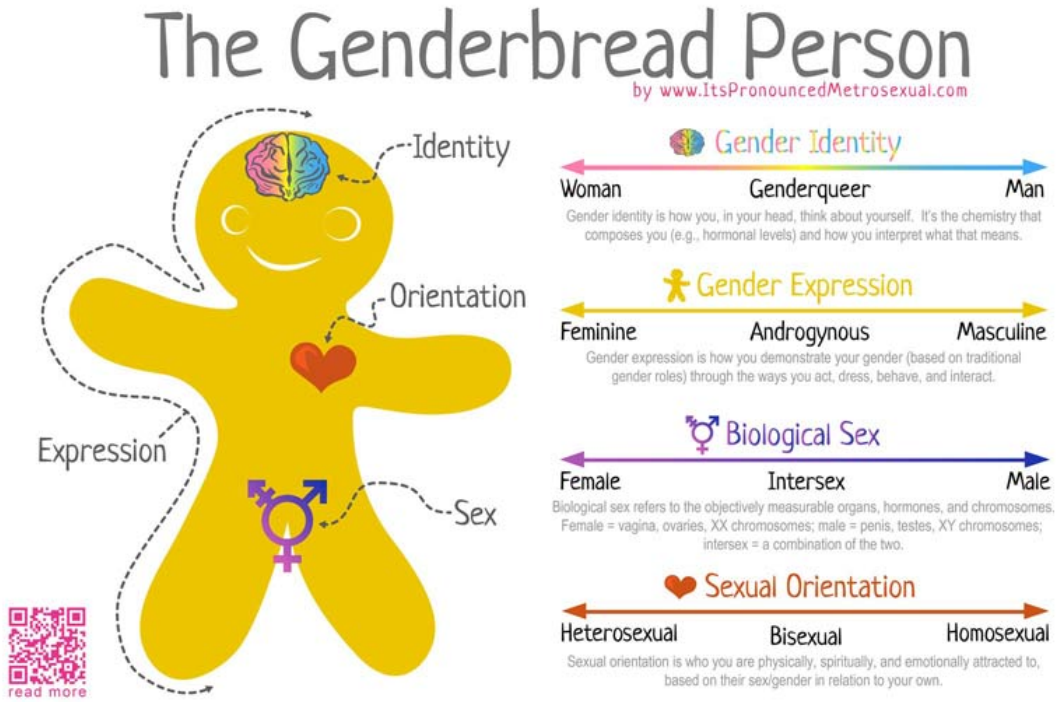

Figure 14. The "Genderbread Person," a pedagogical tool for examining gender identity and expression and sexual orientation using continuums rather than binaries. This image is the first version, which was first published in 2011. Genderbread Person by Sam Killermann. Creative Commons license: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Genderbread_Person

somewhere between masculine and feminine," she said. The participant looked a little defeated. "Hayi," they said in Ndebele, reflecting their exasperation. "Angizwisisi," they murmured under their breath. "I don't get it." While some participants found the workshop stimulating and were excited by the more nuanced vocabulary it made available to them, others grew frustrated by just how complex the scheme was. Another young man questioned the premise of the exercise, asking, "Can I not just be gay? Why does there have to be more?"

In many ways, this workshop was a classic example of the recruitment of diversely situated people as subjects of global gay rights movement. Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey have described the kinds of conceptual frameworks that circulate in these spaces as "normative discourses [that] interpellate individuals into hegemonic gendered social orders that produce the subjects of gender and the trajectory of their desire" (1999, p. 444). However, such framings run the risk of setting up an artificially rigid binary between the West and non-West and imply that sexual taxonomies are exclusively imported and imposed from the outside. In Zimbabwe, sexual identity categories are by no means the first ideological concepts that have prompted people to reconceptualize selfhood, as we have seen (Wariboko, 2018). Almost all of the participants in these workshops have been raised in Christian households and practices of individualized inward reflection have always been part of their lived experience.[17] Moreover, although young queer Zimbabweans embrace and integrate elements of identitarian frameworks, they are not straightforwardly or unproblematically recruited into these discourses, as the Genderbread Person exercise reveals. This echoes findings by anthropologists in various contexts, who have

[17] A similar argument could be made about sexual taxonomies, given that Ndebele and other Southern African languages have a vast number of loan words with etymological origins in English. Common words like imoto (car), iphepha (paper), ibhayibheli (Bible), and umpristi (priest) are all derived from English. Sexual identity categories are just a small number of a vast array of words and idioms with English origins that saturate the Ndebele language today.

observed how queer people "indigenize" globally circulating discourses (Boellstorff, 2003; Reddy, 2005; Rofel, 1999) and recontextualize ideas about gender and sexuality that originate in other contexts (Gal, 2003). Young Zimbabweans perform similar processes recontextualization, particularly by stressing certain aspects of the discourses they encounter and downplaying others.

A few days after the SOGIE workshop, Reggie prepared to deliver a "sensitization" workshop to a group of journalists. We first met Reggie in Chapter 2, where he described the conflict he felt between his devotion to Pentecostal Christianity and identity as a gay man. He was an employee of a sexual rights organization in Bulawayo and often led these kinds of workshops. Prior to becoming involved in gay rights activism he had spent years in a seminary training to become a Pentecostal pastor before he departed from congregational life and his oratory skills were well polished. He was charismatic in a room full of strangers and particularly deft at answering questions in a way that kept his central point in focus. Reggie was so effective at analyzing concepts about sexual identity and adapting them to any given audience that it was almost as if he had transferred his skills of biblical exegesis and sermonic persuasion to a new evangelical mission: changing attitudes towards LGBTQ people in Zimbabwe. The purpose of this event was, in Reggie's words, to "sensitize" journalists to the experiences of queer people and ultimately improve media coverage of LGBTQ issues in Zimbabwe. On this occasion, he opened the workshop with a slide that described sexuality as "a central aspect of being human." He elaborated on the bullet points on the slide, explaining, "Sexuality begins at birth and ends at death. And sexuality is not just about sex; it's about who you are as an individual. Sexuality is an integral part of each person's identity." The fixity of sexual identity was the central pitch of Reggie's presentation. The assembled journalists asked numerous questions that frequently threatened to take the discussion off-topic, but no matter how niche they were Reggie always

managed to return the conversation to his central point: sexual identity is intrinsic to human experience, and it is fixed and unchangeable.

Reggie's framing of sexuality in this workshop clearly echoed various aspects of hegemonic discourses about sexuality. When he described sexuality as "a central aspect of being human," he invoked what Richard Sennett and Michel Foucault (1981) describe as the "yoking" of sexuality and subjectivity in the contemporary world. Moreover, his assertion about the absolute unchangeability of sexuality was in some ways a throwback to nineteenth century ideas about "sexual types" and twentieth century quests to locate a singular genetic origin for sexual orientation in the genome, which are increasingly out of vogue in both Western biosciences and queer theory (Cook, 2021; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). But speaking to Reggie afterwards, it was clear that he was aware of the rigidity and simplicity of his approach and had chosen how he framed sexuality when addressing this audience of journalists. It was designed to anticipate various objections and keep the notion that sexuality is unchangeable in focus. Identitarian understandings of sexuality were not simply externally imposed, then, but rather he had been selective in curating a set of ideas that were intended to counter prevailing narratives, particularly persistent efforts to question, alter, and undermine queerness.

In the context of Zimbabwe, framing queerness as innate and unchangeable has specific affordances. It functions as a powerful rebuttal to accounts that suggest that gender and sexual transgression might, under the right conditions, be altered, discourses that manifest in both Christian and ancestral spaces. But young Zimbabweans' embrace of identitarian categories doesn't simply reflect passive capitulation to hegemonic discourses or the totalizing success of Western modes of conceptualizing selfhood. As we shall see, selective incorporations and deployments of Western models of gender and sexuality enable young queer Zimbabweans to

engage with ancestral cosmologies on a different footing.[18] Once sexual and gender expression are established as fixed and unchangeable, ancestral spirits are decoupled from queerness. As a result, *amadlozi* appear as many faceted kin with whom young queer people can engage on many levels.

(Un)Chosen Spirits

"Back in the day, families used to gather and have ceremonies for ancestors all the time," Maria explained. "But because of all the things that were brought to us from outside it's not happening anymore," she said, referring to the impact of the hegemony of Christian religiosity in urban Zimbabweans today. "They're neglected—in some families no one pays any attention to ancestral spirits these days. Sometimes I think about how lonely they must be," she told me. Maria, who we encountered at the beginning of this chapter in her mother's pursuit of "healing" for her queerness, explained the effects of the demonization of ancestral spirituality on ancestral spirits themselves. As Maria described, *amadlozi* have become unchosen kin, cut loose from their families as younger generations forget—or refuse—to participate in the rituals that sustain them. As we saw above, young people have had a deep distrust of ancestral spirituality inculcated in them by both parents and churches. Moreover, they're associated with a vanishing past that is at odds with the futures many young people aspire to. Especially in comparison to the potential riches that Pentecostal churches and the market economy promise, ancestral spirituality is an unpromising avenue for social and economic advancement. But as non-physical human actors, they require the bodily materiality of the living to endure and participate in social life.

[18] This echoes Eve Sedgwick's observation that the "modern homo/heterosexual definition [is] structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist" (1990, p. 47).

When younger generations neglect to sustain kin relations with ancestral spirits, these spirits wander without descendants to sustain them.

Even for those who don't hold a prejudicial view of ancestral spirituality, the demands of spirits are onerous and often outweigh the relatively meager rewards they offer in the contemporary moment. We met Gertrude in the previous chapter in her role as a spiritual assistant for her mother, the esteemed *sangoma* Gogo MaNcube. Gertrude was a young woman in her twenties who has lived and studied in South Africa for several years. When I visited her family's small house in the suburb of Nketa she was always fashionably dressed, before wrapping a *Zambia*—a skirt made of a single piece of cloth—around her waist to participate in a consultation as her mother's assistant. However, she was deeply apprehensive about the prospect of being chosen by *amadlozi* like her mother. When I asked Gertrude if she'd like to follow her mother's vocation, she began, "Well, first of all, it won't be my choice. They choose," she said, referring to the spirits. She went on, "But no—I don't want her life! It's hard work, really, really hard work. Everything she does is for other people, either for the spirits or for the people who consult with her." There are many restrictions on Gogo MaNcube's life, she explained. "There are so many rules she has to follow," Gertrude told me. "She's not allowed to be intimate most of the time. She can't eat fish or lamb and a lot of specific vegetables," she said, rolling her eyes. "And Mama is always complaining about how tired she is. Channeling spirits is very demanding—they take all your energy," she explained. Witnessing her mother's day-to-day life as a *sangoma* did little to make the vocation appealing to Gertrude and she knew if she was chosen it would radically alter her life. "I really, really hope it doesn't come to me," she concluded. The factors Gertrude listed mean that most young urban Zimbabweans view ancestral spirituality with a mixture of fear, disdain, and disinterest.

In their growing interest in developing relationships with ancestral spirits young queer people stand out from their peers. I suggest the attraction of ancestral spirituality for young queer people is rooted in the unique form of kinship it provides them. In *Families We Choose* (1991), Weston outlined how queer communities in the United States in the 1980s were pioneering the idiom of "chosen families." Weston argued that gay and lesbian chosen families signaled a move away from a model of kinship organized primarily around biological reproduction and towards one in which acts of care created durable kinship ties. At the heart of this shift was the notion of choice. As Weston noted, the idiom of choice was closely associated with other "United Statesian" ideals, notably individualist accounts of personhood and capitalist modes of consumption. As she stated, "Choice is an individualistic […] notion that focuses on the subjective power of an 'I' to formulate relationships to people and things, untrammeled by worldly constraints" (1991, p. 110). That is, choice was a marker of an autonomous and self-sovereign subject who had the capacity to shape their own destiny. As Weston suggested, those creating chosen families in the U.S. reflected broader American ideals and models of personhood.

The forms of chosen family that young queer Zimbabweans' create in their relationships with spirits contrast with the United Statesian model described by Weston. In Zimbabwe, a different understanding of personhood has historically prevailed, in which individuals come into being through relationships with others and the concept of choice has had relatively little purchase, especially in the domain of kinship (Mavhunga, 2014; Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Self-realization occurred in quite different ways to liberal accounts of personhood, through relations of obligation, hierarchy, and dependence that enabled people to accrue relational ties and achieve social flourishing (Ferguson, 2013). Colonialism, missionization, and the ever

greater spread of Western idioms of personhood have undoubtedly altered the situation profoundly (Comaroff, 1985; Wariboko, 2018). Yet broad and durable kinship networks endure, often serving as a social safety net in the absence of state institutions to support those in need. Young queer people often experience the loss of these powerful ties when they come out to relatives, which can entail the sudden severance of kinship.

As Maria said, "Only a few of us are blessed with families who are understanding. When we come out, many people experience rejection, isolation, exclusion." This stems from a perception that by repudiating heterosexual marriage and childbearing, queer people opt out of normative models of personhood and by implication the kin relations they underpin. As we saw in the previous chapter, Bernard maintained secrecy about his sexuality for fear of the impact it would have on his kinship ties. But unlike with living relatives, where knowledge of sexual identity might result in the severance of kinship ties, ancestral spirits *choose* to build ties with young queer people. Indeed, when queer Zimbabweans describe their interest in ancestral spirituality, they rarely frame it as a choice they make for themselves. Sitting on the floor of her consulting room in Gwabalanda, for instance, Thando described the tense and sometimes vicious contests over ancestral spirits that occur across generations within some families. "In many families people fight over *amadlozi*—like, they really, really fight." She went on, "Every person wants those powers, even if they pretend to be good Christians." When the demonizing lens of Pentecostalism is set aside, *amadlozi* promise all kinds of rewards. They can ensure anything from good harvests and reproductive fertility to advantageous marriages and material wealth. These kinds of rewards are attractive to many, even church attending Christians, and lead to

struggles to apprehend and deploy the powers of *amadlozi*, albeit often in secret.[19] But, as Thando explained, "The truth is, people can try all they want, but the *idlozi* chooses where it wants to go."

As Thando's words indicate, the living are not the primary agents of choice in relations with spirits—the spirits choose, and their living hosts are meant to have no choice but to oblige. They choose their hosts from among the wide range of their living descendants, looking in particular for someone who will set aside their own desires and needs in order to undertake the wishes of their spirits. Indeed, *sangomas* maintain that failing to accept the calling will result in endless personal hardships for their chosen host, as spirits assert their power and authority over time. Moreover, entering into a relationship with an ancestral spirit involves occupying a relation of juniority. The spirits' relative elderhood implies seniority and authority, with the expectation that the host will perform various tasks and duties that are onerous and even unpleasant, as Gertrude's account of her mother's occupation suggests. In this context, the idiom of choice on the part of spirits operates not to facilitate self-directed decisions, but rather to recruit the host into obligations that are lifelong, unequal, and inalterable. As Thando said, "From my perspective, *amadlozi* see the person's heart and go where they're comfortable," Thando tells me. "The *idlozi* will be thinking, 'If I sit on this person, can they fully carry the burden?' Not everyone can handle it, but they know who can."

For young queer people, the experience of being chosen is a powerful affirmation of their value and abilities, and significantly contrasts with the attitudes of their living kin. Moreover, because ancestral spirits have the capacity to see things that are hidden and know people's

[19] The desire to apprehend the powers of *amadlozi* is distinct from the notion that the vocation of the *sangoma* is unappealing. The kinds of struggles Thando describes aim to apprehend the powers of *amadlozi* to use for instrumental ends, but people generally do not aspire to the kind of life-long commitment the *sangomahood* entails.

secrets, some of my interlocutors joke that ancestral spirits are the only people they never had to come out to, because they knew everything about them before choosing them. Martha was a transwoman in her early thirties who was just beginning to learn more about her ancestral spirits, and conveyed a similar sentiment. “I often wonder what kind of ancestor has chosen me,” she said. “Because they must know I’m trans, but unlike my mother and my brothers they know me and they want me.” In her discussion of being chosen by ancestral spirits, Martha brought the categories of the global gay rights movement—in this case her trans identity—into dialogue with ancestral epistemologies. In her telling, there was no possibility of altering her identity. As Martha went on, “That quality of being accepted as you are makes it easier to want to connect to the ancestors and nurture a relationship with them.” So while young queer people reject the notion that *amadlozi* explain their sexuality or gender expression, ancestral spirits nevertheless play a role in affirming their sense of who they are. Indeed, for many it was the first experience of relatives who not only tolerated their gender expression and sexual identity but actively embraced it.

As such, ancestral spirits offer a distinctively Zimbabwean form of chosen family. On the one hand, young queer Zimbabweans choose to cultivate relationships with ancestral spirits through ongoing acts of care and communication. In contrast, many Christian Zimbabweans—that is, the vast majority of the urban population—opt out of the forms of reciprocal care that enable the maintenance and endurance of bonds with ancestors, which ultimately serves to undermine their continuation as active kinship relationships. On the other hand, because spirits choose their hosts from among their many living descendants, choice operates in the other direction, too. For my interlocutors, the experience of being chosen by ancestral spirits makes them a particularly valued type of kin, different to their living relatives for whom knowledge of

their sexuality threatens to sever kinship ties. From this perspective, choice isn't the straightforward action of an autonomous subject, as in the context of the US and other Western societies (Da Silva, 2007; Eng et al., 2005; Povinelli, 2005). The model of choice operative in relations with *amadlozi* recruits people into mutually dependent and enduring relationships, including those with long deceased forebears. And as they forge these new kinship relations with spirits, young queer people reimagine the kinds of healing *amadlozi* can provide.

A New Idiom of Healing

"Sometimes the environment in Zim just feels hellbent on breaking you," Kutenda told me. "My life has been a lot," they went on, alluding to a series of personal hardships and crises they had grappled with throughout their life. As one of eight children, Kutenda lost both parents before reaching adulthood. When they came out as queer and non-binary in their mid-twenties, their relationships with most of their siblings fractured and have been distant ever since. But around the same time, Kutenda began to build an independent life for themselves. They won a scholarship to study in South Africa and after graduating landed a competitive job with an international company in Cape Town. Kutenda finally felt like they were on a trajectory to a new life and hoped to build a long term future in South Africa. Shortly after turning thirty, however, they discovered they had been denied a permanent residence permit by the South African government. As a result, Kutenda was forced to return to Zimbabwe and rebuild their life from scratch, with no relatives to look to for support and a thin network of friends in a country they hadn't lived in for almost a decade. Kutenda decided to settle in Bulawayo, a city where they had no family ties but hoped might offer a fresh start.

"At that time I felt so vulnerable, so exposed. I was in a total emotional rut," Kutenda told me. They felt let down by living kin, but also betrayed by the Christian God they'd been raised to believe in. "I felt like Job," Kutenda said, referring to the biblical figure whose faith in God was tested through the destruction of the things he cared about most deeply—his family, his health, and his wealth. Kutenda went on, "Like, how much suffering can one person take?" Moreover, they were dismayed by the reaction of other Christians to their situation. "Some Christians told me that my suffering was punishment for being gay," they explained. "I think that was the moment I saw some Christians for what they are. I began questioning things, questioning Christianity. I didn't want to be like Job, who simply endured the suffering. So in the end I broke up with God," Kutenda said, and from that time on, they began to describe themselves as an atheist. Kutenda's expression of a complete loss of faith and identification as an atheist is rare in Zimbabwe, where asserting atheism can be interpreted as equivalent to professing satanism. Indeed, they were was the only person among hundreds of members of the sexual rights organizations I conducted fieldwork with in Bulawayo who used the term to describe their religious identity. Yet while Kutenda's atheism appeared to signal a clear-cut rejection of religious practice, they had nonetheless developed an interest in ancestral spirituality.

"Around that time, I began forming a connection with my ancestors," Kutenda explained. Having lived in South Africa for several years they were inspired by the greater openness to ancestral traditions than in Zimbabwe, where public participation in ancestral practices is frowned upon.[20] Through conversations with friends and online investigations, they gradually constructed a new perspective on *amadlozi*. As with Maria and Fikile in the previous chapter,

[20] Although they are neighboring countries with intertwined histories, ancestral spirituality has a very different status in Zimbabwe and South Africa. It is hard to account for these differences, but many of my interlocutors noted that ancestral spirituality has a more prominent and public role, and although Christian practice is ubiquitous in both countries, the two coexist with less friction in South Africa than in Zimbabwe.

Kutenda trusted queer perspectives on ancestral spirits more than those of elders. One small but significant step for Kutenda was beginning to keep track of their dreams, a practice encouraged by several South African *sangomas* they followed on social media. "They're like pieces of a puzzle," Kutenda told me, speaking of dreams. "When you put them together, you see your story. Your ancestors are telling it to you through your dreams." In the privacy of their small flat in Bulawayo, they nurtured a relationship with their ancestors through simple and sometimes improvised rituals—lighting candles, meditating, singing songs. Through these practices, Kutenda told me, they began to feel the presence of and a connection to their ancestors.

Kutenda spoke powerfully about how the experience of building relationships with their ancestors has affected them.[21] "Mostly, I think it's that quality of being accepted as you are that makes it easier to want to connect and nurture a relationship with them," Kutenda said. They explained that unlike with living relatives, for whom discovery of their queerness of entailed distance and abandonment, they felt accepted and protected by ancestral spirits. "I'm yet to find a queer person who says, 'My ancestors revealed to me that they're against my sexual orientation,'" Kutenda told me, echoing their embrace of the identitarian frameworks we encountered above. "It emboldens me. Like, my ancestors love me the way I am, man. If somebody's going to have a problem with me, my ancestors will deal with them. It gives me so much courage." As we've seen, being chosen by ancestral spirits singles out the host as equipped with unique qualities to serve as a vessel for the spirits. But perhaps more significantly, it also means that they have been chosen not in spite of but because of their unique subject position. In this sense, queerness is transformed from something to be changed into an invaluable aspect of their being.

[21] Tracy Luedke (2011) has written about the intimate nature of spirit-host relationships in rural Mozambique, and the interweaving of spirit and host biographies, alongside the enduring unknowability of spirits.

"I think it's who we are that attracts our ancestors to us," Maria told me. We met Maria at the beginning of this chapter, when she described her encounters with *sangomas* as a teenager. Now, she feels that the irony of these attempts to alter her was that her queerness was precisely what made her so well placed to serve as their host. "Really, they know we're queer before we even know it ourselves," she told me. Indeed, noting the preponderance of queer people with ancestral callings in Bulawayo, Maria has thought deeply about why ancestral spirits are so often drawn to queer people as their hosts. "Most *amadlozi* were alienated in some way during their lives," she explained. "They were special, but they were outsiders," Maria said, reflecting her own personal philosophy of *amadlozi.* "That's what I think, anyway. And nowadays, now that most families are not doing the ceremonies they used to, *amadlozi* feel neglected," she told me. "I think they feel a kindredness with us, in that sense. They understand our isolation and our exclusion. And they seek people who understand loneliness as much as they do." With these words, Maria demonstrated how young queer Zimbabweans bring their own imaginative and creative labors to bear on ancestral spirituality. In particular, Maria saw parallels between her experiences of queerness and those of *amadlozi*, both during their lifetimes and in their exile from contemporary social life.

By offering a distinctive and powerful form of chosen family, ancestral spirits facilitate queer forms of healing. When ancestral spirits choose young queer people from among their descendants to operate as their hosts, they allow them to challenge various stories they've been told about themselves by family members, pastors, older *sangomas*, and even politicians—that queerness is "un-African," that their gender expressions and intimate lives should be altered, and that their subject positions represent an obstacle to building strong relationships with kin. For Maria and Kutenda, fostering relationships with ancestral spirits proved to offer a particular kind

of healing, reversing the dynamic in which the *sangoma* primarily provides healing to others. Indeed, while Maria still perceived *amadlozi's* prime role as providing healing for others, she foregrounded the *sangoma* as the object of healing. "Being a healer is also a journey towards healing yourself," she told me. For Maria, this form of healing enabled novel perspectives on herself. "I think for the first time this is making me feel worthy," Maria said. When you're chosen, they see all these things about you that you don't know about yourself, and they help you heal the parts that are damaged—they don't ignore them," she concluded. As Maria's words indicated, young queer people reimagine the occupation of the *sangoma* as one that is not oriented solely towards the healing of others, but also towards the healing of the self.

For Maria, some of these forms of healing were very concrete. Maria had experienced several acts of sexual violence from men in the past and described carrying both fear and animosity towards men she didn't know. When she walked past groups of men in her neighborhood she was often filled with terror, she explained. As she embraced her queer identity, she compensated for this by immersing herself in feminist activism in Bulawayo and surrounding herself with women and queer people. She worked fulltime for a sexual rights organization where all the employees were queer women, and in her social life cisgender and heterosexual men were largely absent. But one of her ancestral spirits—the *khulu* or grandfather spirit she first learned about in a *sangoma's* consulting room with her mother—facilitated a reconciliation with masculinity and enabled a form of healing from violence. "With all the things I've been through, I don't think I would have found any kind of reconciliation without my grandfather spirit," she told me. "I think my *khulu* allowed me to trust men again," she said. More recently, she recalled, she didn't feel the same kind of fear walking past men in the street knowing she was protected by her *khulu*.

Maria, Kutenda, and my other interlocutors spoke powerfully about the relationships they had with ancestral spirits and the forms of healing they had found through them. This healing stemmed from various sources: the sense of being chosen, queerness being unarticulated yet embraced, the companionship spirits offer, and the guidance they afford. In essence, ancestral spirits provided some of what living kin might, if those relationships hadn't become strained or severed altogether. As Maria and Kutenda found healing through ancestral spirits, moreover, they reworked the relationship between healing and queerness in ancestral cosmologies. In their accounts, queerness was fundamentally inalterable and above all valuable. It offered a subjective view of the world that made them uniquely placed to serve as their spirits' hosts, to relate to them, and forge deep relationships with them. As such, young queer Zimbabweans reframed queerness within local metaphysical orders, transforming it from a problem to be solved into an unchangeable and intrinsically valuable aspect of a person's being.

Conclusion

As they cultivate these intimate relationships with spirits, queer Zimbabweans implicitly respond to voices that question the "Zimbabweanness" or "Africanness" of queer people. Their spiritual practices are not primarily a form of political speech or aimed at settling the debates that have gripped the Zimbabwean public for more than two decades, however. Their spiritual quests are deeply personal and often tentative, to the point that most of my interlocutors only share information about their spirits with a handful of chosen friends. They foster these relationships behind closed doors, sometimes in bedrooms with their Christian parents sleeping next door, or in *sangomas'* shrouded consulting rooms on clandestine missions to discover new information. Many remain uncertain about the paths they're pursuing, constantly mindful of what their parents

and pastors would think. Their conviction only grows with the awareness of the qualities of kinship that ancestral spirits offer. For those who manage to cultivate relationships with *amadlozi*, these kinship ties turn out to be utterly unique. *Amadlozi* are kin who know about their sexual identities, who embrace them, and who choose them because of it. All of these dimensions are affirming not only in the face of politicized homophobia, but also in lieu of close ties with living kin.

In forging these distinctive relationships with *amadlozi*, queer Zimbabweans creatively reimagine a foundational form of relatedness in Southern Africa—ancestral descent—and the cosmologies it draws upon. But crucially, their intimate relationships with *amadlozi* decouple kinship from those things that often make it hostile to expressions of queerness: heterosexual reproduction, the couple form, and normative expressions of gender. As such, these relationships are exactly the kinds of innovative and world-making intimate practices that scholars in queer African studies have argued would facilitate the articulation of distinctively African queer subjectivities, and they suggest that kinship remains a recuperable and innovative type of intimate attachment. Like earlier generations, young queer Zimbabweans find forms of healing, sustenance, and knowledge from *amadlozi*. Their relationships with ancestors are quite different to the public and collective rituals that formerly sustained ancestors, and in some places still do. As my interlocutors often reminded me, a "calling" is a promise of knowledge yet to come—the eventual destination is not singular, and it cannot be fully known in advance. In drawing on the archives of African metaphysics and idioms of the global gay rights movement, then, young queer Zimbabweans simultaneously articulate kinship on their own terms, reinvent ancestral spirituality, and articulate novel queer theologies.

Epilogue

"I don't even know the *khulu* that guides me yet," Lindiwe told me, her voice conveying deep longing and gnawing sense of uncertainty. She and Zandile were sitting around the table of my small office, interjecting and correcting one another as they narrated fragments of their experiences over the course of the previous year. They told their story in stops and starts, pausing on moments that were luminous with intrigue and excitement while also weaving in episodes of doubt and apprehension. During that year they'd consulted with a number of *sangomas*, sought to determine which friends might offer important insights and whose perspectives they ought to keep at bay, and scrolled through Twitter and YouTube every evening, picking up tidbits of information that spoke to specific issues they were grappling with. These sources helped them parse the messages Lindiwe received in her dreams, which continued to be full of potent symbols that Zandile seemed uniquely adept at interpreting. Most of all, their narrative underlined the multifarious consequences of their openness to reimagining ancestors: the reordering of their perceptions of spiritual authority, the rearrangement many of their closest relationships, and the recalibration their sense of selves.

It had taken years for Lindiwe and Zandile to get to the point of being willing to shift their understandings of *amadlozi* from demonic spirits to warm and benevolent figures with whom they might want to foster relationships. They'd been raised in mainline Christian churches—Lindiwe in the Salvation Army, Zandile in the Seventh Day Adventist church—where the Bible had informed the moral and epistemological universes they inhabited, one they shared with their parents and siblings. From as early as they could remember they had known God and the stories

of the Bible, and as they navigated the waters of ancestral spirituality it continued to be an important theological touchstone. Like many young Zimbabweans, they had begun to depart from their parents' visions of Christian religiosity in adolescence when they each discovered Pentecostal congregations they found utterly captivating. In these spaces they encountered a radically new gospel that taught that they could approach God on their own and form a deeply personal relationship with Him, independent of pastoral authority. Their churches hoped this teaching would deepen their commitments to Christianity, but it also threw open the question of who—if anyone—ought to mediate their relationship with God. Pastors still positioned themselves as occupying a vital intermediary role but the gospel they preached made their necessity unclear. For queer people like Lindiwe and Zandile, the notion of a personally available God was a particularly powerful message. Having spent years grappling with questions of sexual ethics, their conviction of being loved by God regardless of their church's teachings on same-sex intimacies was deeply meaningful.

This shift in Lindiwe and Zandile's understanding of the Christian God opened the door to interrogating other aspects of Pentecostal doctrine and more wide-ranging spiritual quests. While they continued to feel at home in their young congregation, away from Sunday services they gradually abandoned various elements of the church's teaching and began to devise their own queer theologies. As they entered Bulawayo's network of sexual rights organizations, they found a community of people they could relate to without anticipating prejudice towards their gender and sexual expression. In the background of these spaces of queer sociality was a bubbling movement that was reimagining *amadlozi* and they soon began to encounter a novel perspective on ancestors. Ancestors have played a vital role in Zimbabwean social life for centuries, if not millennia, but here was a new generation that had been raised to shun them engaging with them

afresh. More than this, as young queer people they were critically interrogating and nuancing ancestral epistemologies that attributed queerness to the presence of ancestral spirits. Coming across this movement proved to be particularly intriguing for Lindiwe as it promised answers to some of her most deeply mystifying personal experiences, particularly her dreams. Detailed and evocative dreams that frequently seemed to anticipate important events had been part of her life for as long as she could remember. But the information she received from friends and acquaintances in Bulawayo's queer networks made her realize that her dreams were rich with symbols she hadn't yet learned to discern, particularly snakes that hinted at the presence of powerful *amadlozi*.

As they set out to learn more about ancestral spirituality, Lindiwe and Zandile discovered it contoured their relationships with relatives and circumscribed boundaries within the queer community. A number of Christian friends were skeptical of their uptake of ancestral spirituality and wondered why they had chosen to pursue a path widely understood to be dangerous. It affected their relationships with friends who were also pursuing ancestral spiritual, as they sometimes doubted the benevolence and accuracy of their advice. But it strengthened Lindiwe and Zandile's relationship with one another, and as they grew close and eventually fell in love they discovered that Zandile was able to unpick the threads of Lindiwe's dreams like no one else. At the same time, it significantly reordered their relationships with kin. The suspicion some of their relatives had about the nature of Lindiwe and Zandile's relationship had already induced a level of detachment and hostility, but now they were forced to conceal their spiritual practices too. This meant that many of their family relationships became more distant, but it reconfigured others in unexpected ways. As they questioned Lindiwe's mother characterization of her grandmother as a witch, for instance, they reimagined her as the individual whose spiritual gifts

Lindiwe had inherited. And as they grew distant from many of their living relatives, *amadlozi* came to occupy an increasingly central place in their lives. These spirits were different from the volatile and capricious *amadlozi* described by elders: they were loving, intimate, caring, and protective. They had chosen Lindiwe from among her many living descendants to act as their channel, seeing qualities in her that made her uniquely placed to act as their medium. As a result, *amadlozi* promised a new type of intimate attachment that entailed a reimagination of genealogical kinship.

As they set out for answers to these new questions, both Lindiwe and Zandile felt they were embarking on a path that would shape the rest of their lives. Even a year into this journey, they knew they were just at the beginning; as Lindiwe indicated above, she still didn't know much about the identity of the grandfather spirit who manifested as a snake in her dreams: his name, his aptitudes, his personality. She was learning how to foster a relationship with him, but the path was made fraught by the fact that learning about *amadlozi* raised endless questions about who to trust. As a result they decided against placing their trust in any one individual, least of all an established *sangoma*. Their trajectories were largely self-directed and they trusted the perspectives of queer friends over elders' established ways of doing things. Moreover, their learning was often informed by a steady stream of information dispensed by publicity-savvy South African *sangomas* popular on social media. Seeking to integrate fragments of information from varied sources became the defining character of Lindiwe and Zandile's spiritual journey and characterized how they forged their novel theologies. Over time, this method of spiritual exploration meant that they departed not only from hegemonic Christian accounts of ancestors but also from reinvented the ancestral traditions of older Zimbabweans.

As Lindiwe and Zandile worked their way through thickets of information and ideas about ancestral spirits, they continued to encounter novel doubts and dilemmas. In our last conversation, they told me that Zandile had recently begun to struggle to decipher the meaning of Lindiwe's dreams. "Her dreams are becoming more complicated to explain," Zandile admitted. "I'm actually struggling to remember my dreams," Lindiwe added. Faced with these issues, Lindiwe had messaged a friend from university in South Africa who was also pursuing ancestral spirituality to ask for her advice. "She told me she thinks my *gogos* are mad at me because they feel I've been neglecting them," Lindiwe explained, referring to grandmother spirits. "I was like, 'What?! What *gogos?!*,'" Lindiwe exclaimed. She had known about her grandfather spirit for some time and had focused her attention on perceiving signs of his presence in her dreams. But she hadn't been aware that she had inherited other spirits. "My friend told me that in general you do not have a male guide without female guides. She said I've been prioritizing the male guide and neglecting the female guides, which is why my dreams are becoming fuzzy—the *gogos* are trying to send me a message." This news shifted Lindiwe's understandings of the spirits she was dealing with and opened up new questions and uncertainties. "My friend said I should try to appease the *gogos* by doing a ritual in the night. But now the predicament I have is that I don't really know how do this ritual. She was like, 'Just do what you can—usually guides are understanding and they just need you to actually *talk* to them,'" Lindiwe said, the doubt evident in her expression.

While their journeys were idiosyncratic and shaped by deeply personal dynamics among friends, family, and church communities, Lindiwe and Zandile encapsulated a path trodden by a growing number of young queer Zimbabweans. This dissertation has argued that young queer people in Zimbabwe are at the forefront of projects to articulate distinctively African queer

theologies that challenge the rhetoric of local political and religious leaders, who question their religiosity and Africanness. In drawing on the archives of African metaphysics to nuance the categories of the global gay rights movement, I have suggested that they embody a form of queerness that doesn't presume secularity or antagonism to religious life. Indeed, it builds on modes of spirituality that are layered in Zimbabwe's religious landscape and have been vital to social struggles for centuries. In the process, young queer people refashion the ancestral spirituality of their elders to make it a sphere in which they can forge intimate world-making practices and articulate novel queer theologies. In doing so, they play key a role in reshaping Southern Africa's religious landscape, wresting authority away from elders, articulating visions of unmediated and intimate experiences with the divine, and recasting themselves as innovative theologians.

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