

# Spiritual or social phenomenon: A cultural analysis of *amakhosi* possession in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

Luvuyo Ntombana\* and Siphiwo Meveni  
Department of Religion Studies,  
Faculty of Theology  
University of the Free State  
Email: NtombanaL@ufs.ac.za

Corresponding author\*

## Abstract

This paper examines a strange behaviour associated with a spirit possession called *amakhosi* which has recently been prevalent in the Eastern and Western Cape. These behaviours were reported by various newspapers and community radio stations, where learners were said to mysteriously climb school walls with their bare hands, groaning violently and intimidating teachers and other learners. In some instances, these occurrences were said to have brought learning to a standstill. Media communications reported that teachers were seriously concerned about a growing trend of children purchasing traditional medicine called *amakhosi* that makes them behave strangely. Individual interviews, group discussion and observations were conducted in selected schools in Mdantsane Township, East London.

The main aim was to ascertain the meaning of *amakhosi*, the aim for acquiring them and its significance to those who acquire them. The findings of this study suggest that *amakhosi* is both a spiritual and a socio-economic phenomenon which mostly involves the youth from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds who are struggling in identifying their roles and positions in post-apartheid South Africa. The main recommendation is that this *amakhosi* phenomenon needs a holistic approach and not just interventions by church leaders and traditional healers.

**Key words:** Possession, amakhosi, amafufunyana, spirituality.



Source: <http://thumbs.dreamstime.com/t/people-silhouettes-silhouettes-group-vector-illustration-36086362.jpg>

## Introduction

Recently and mainly since about 2010, there has been a growing prevalence of strange behaviours in black township schools, especially in the Eastern and the Western Cape. Such behaviour is said to have been caused by a spirit possession called *amakhosi* (literally meaning *kings* in isiZulu). These occurrences were reported in newspapers and on community radio stations and were said to be disrupting learning in several schools. In a recent case, boys from Umtiza High School in East London were reported to have been mysteriously climbing a wall using their bare hands and groaning violently, intimidating other learners and teachers (*Daily Dispatch*, 2012). Other cases were also reported in Mdantsane, where children mimicked animal sounds, indicating the possibility of spirit possession. This phenomenon brought learning to a standstill in some schools in the Eastern and Western Cape, as some cases required the intervention of law enforcement (*South African Herald*, 2008; *West Cape News*, 2012; Izwi Lethemba FM radio station; Mdantsane FM radio station).

The media reported that teachers, parents and community leaders were increasingly concerned over a growing possession of *amakhosi* and its effect in various schools and in the community at large. When such occurrences take place, school principals and teachers feel ill-equipped, threatened and are often simply too frightened to respond in a meaningful manner. At times, both traditional and Church leaders were called to intervene and each referred to the behaviour as demonic. This phenomenon generated social panic and even threatened to force the closure of some schools, as parents removed their children from schools that were affected by *amakhosi*. The affected children became increasingly anti-social and aggressive. Most of them believed that they carried in their bodies a superior older entity, which they refer to as 'amaxhego' (ancients of ancients, or ancestors). These children stick together and as a result created *amakhosi* gangs, which are characterised by contestations of power and superiority. Induction into these gangs was said to be occurring outside the school premises at abandoned and vandalised buildings. In other cases, the possession provoked suicides and precipitated gang wars. Against this background, this paper examines and explores the phenomenon of *amakhosi* possession among township youth. The researchers ask questions such as: how are *amakhosi* acquired; what is the significance of acquiring them; is the phenomenon spiritual or social; what is its relationship with the old use of the word *amakhosi*; and what is the relationship between *amakhosi* and *amafufunya* (traditionally considered to be bad spirits)?

## Methodology and area of study

In this paper the researchers provide a thick description of the *amakhosi* phenomenon derived from qualitative exploratory interviews and group discussions. The intention was to better understand this phenomenon from the participants' perspective and its background, meaning and significance in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Participants included traditional and church leaders, members of the *amakhosi* possession group, teachers and school principals. The researchers made sure that all ethical procedures were taken into consideration. This was done by ensuring that the rights and welfare of all participants were protected at all times during the study. Participants were informed of the purpose and the goals of the study. Informed consent was requested and re-negotiated with each individual participant. Given that most of this research took place at schools, the researchers received a permission letter from the Eastern Cape Department of Education prior to approaching the schools.

Ethical approval for this study was received from the University of Fort Hare. The informants were learners and most of them were in grades 8 to 11. Individual interviews were conducted with 10 learners from each of the five schools and various group discussions

were held with teachers, traditional healers, community leader and learners. The names of learners used in this study are pseudonyms and therefore not their real names. The following high schools in Mdantsane were chosen for the study:

1. J.S. Mati
2. Masixole
3. Philemon Ngcelwane
4. Buchule
5. Wongalethu

The study was conducted in Mdantsane, a South African township situated between East London and King William's Town and now part of the newly formed Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. Mdantsane was established as part of the Ciskei homeland in the 1960's as a settlement to keep black people out of the city of East London, which was only demarcated for white people at the time (Dauda, 1996). In the 1950s, the East London city council undertook to move the majority of the inhabitants of East and West Bank to the new dormitory township of Mdantsane, located 25km outside the city. The aim was to create a fully-fledged town, semi-autonomous but economically dependent on white urban areas. Between 1964 and 1970, thousands of families were re-settled in Mdantsane, but the envisaged growth into a city never materialised. Even today, Mdantsane is still overpopulated and underprivileged and educational standards in this area carry a historical disadvantage compared to multi-racial schools situated in the city of East London. Mdantsane is one of the areas characterised by a high rate of unemployment and poverty, along with violence and crime. The high schools chosen for the study are in various units or zones in Mdantsane Township.

### **Theories of possession**

According to Petrus (2010: 50), most, if not all, human societies are aware of the three-dimensional nature of human beings, that is, humans as biological, social and spiritual beings. Even various religions recognise that a person is not complete unless all three dimensions are recognised and appreciated. There might be differences in how much recognition is given; for example, in some societies and religions, one dimension is usually more recognised than the other. African societies have always been aware of these aspects and their life and culture has always been centred on all of them. In addition, from an African perspective, these dimensions have to be understood as 'whole' and not unconnected. It is within this context that religion and cosmology become significant aspects of African cultures, as a way of explaining the place of humans in relation to the wider natural and supernatural world (Petrus, 2010). Petrus (2010) further argues that Africans do not separate religion from culture; religion is not a state of being in which one can be in today and decide otherwise tomorrow, it is part of the identity of African people. For Africans, religion is who they were, who they are and who they aspire to be and accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death (Mbiti, 1969: 2; Ntombana, 2011:219). That explains why spirituality is so significant to African people and as a result it is strongly embraced as part of their identity. As we will show later, not all possessions are bad from an African experience and perspective; there are bad and good spirit possessions.

Over the years, various theorists have contributed to the studies of spirit possessions across cultures and in Africa. The major contributor is Lewis (1966, 1969, and 1971), who adopts a functionalist approach. Lewis views spirit possession in terms of 'rational' strategies, as to what sort of people become possessed and what function possession plays in relation to their material conditions of existence. Lewis makes a distinction between what he calls a cult, where possession is a positive experience involving spirits who uphold the dominant moral order of a society and typically speak through men, and peripheral cults, where

possession by amoral spirits is locally regarded as a form of illness that typically afflicts women and other marginal or subordinate individuals. According to Lewis, spirit possession is a means by which marginalised categories exert mystical pressures upon their superiors in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sanctions are available to them. They are a means of upward mobility for people of low status who are excluded from the dominant religious forms. Lewis's theory also received criticism from various anthropologists who argued that his theory was reductive and further fails to grasp the full significance of sorcery and possession practices. Instead, they suggest that possession and sorcery should be examined in their own terms. Janice Boddy (1989) argues that the phenomenon of possession can be located in its wider social and historic context in any particular society, and sees possession as a political and moral act through which people are thinking about and making statements about their relationship to others. Boddy (1989) further states that possession can be explored in relation to issues of selfhood, identity, global political and economic domination, and the articulation of an aesthetic of human relationships to the world.

### Overview of possession

The English term 'possession' includes notions of ownership, of control and of dominion; moreover the use of this term is well documented in English from as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Bourguignon, 1976:8). According to Boddy (1994), possession is a broad term which refers to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and human reality. Spirit possession can also be defined as the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than them (Boddy, 1994). Bourguignon (1976:8) presented a cross-cultural analysis of possession beliefs and behaviours where he described a possessed person as charged in some way through the presence of a spirit entity or power in him or on him, taking over his own personality, soul or self. One can conclude that the possession experience is one of the most powerful 'spiritual' experiences a person can encounter. Possession can simply be defined as an experience of being taken over by an outside force that one cannot normally perceive. An example is the *ukuthwasa* or *intwaso* (calling and passage of being a traditional healer) in Xhosa communities, where a person is called by ancestors to be an *igqirha* (traditional healer). Thus, *Ukuthwasa* is a choice made by ancestors for the person and in most cases a person never has peace until they respond to the calling (Mlisa, 2010:5). In making reference to own personal experience, Mlisa (2010: i) says that she never thought that she would ever be an *igqirha* and she was also scared of the covering clay used by *amagqirha*, but then in the end accepted that she was pre-destined to be an *igqirha*. The other example is the spirit possession among Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. These churches strongly believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost). When one is being baptised in the spirit, there are expected signs such as speaking in unknown tongues, making a loud noise, falling down in the spirit or jumping or running inside the church. All those performances are not done under normal circumstances, but are only due to possession.

Lewis (1971) makes a pertinent point that it is not for us to judge who is and who is not really 'possessed', arguing that if someone is generally considered to be in a state of possession in his/her own cultural milieu, then they should be considered possessed. Three elements can be drawn from the above possession narratives; firstly, that the power is not of the person, but of powerful spiritual forces; secondly, that the consequence of possession is more powerful or overrides the possessed person; thirdly, the very experience of spirit possession is dependent upon the beliefs, norms, customs and expectations of society. Lewis (1971) also agrees that in many parts of the world, spirit possession is strongly related to cultural and social conditions. Most societies and religions have some experiences of and beliefs in spirit possession, though possession experience is more common and prevalent in some than in others.

Spirit-possession beliefs are geographically and culturally contained and therefore one cannot expect that they will be manifested in the same way, even though there are similar trends found in them. There are also various traditions and interpretations of spirit possessions, for instance the Catholic Church considers possession as a battle for the victim's soul, while other cultures embrace spirit possession as an integral part of their spiritual practices (Lewis, 1971).

### **Amafufunyana possession**

As previously noted, *amafufunyana* are traditionally known to be bad spirits that have been prevalent among *amaXhosa* and *amaZulu*. African communities believe that *amafufunyana* possessions are as a result of people being invaded and taken over by evil spirits as a result of witchcraft (Edwards, 1984; Ensink et.al., 1998:884). The person who performs the bewitchment takes ants that have been feeding on a dead body in a grave. These ants are made into a poison (*idliso*) which is given secretly to the affected person. One symptom is that people hear voices coming from their own stomach area. These voices speak a different language to their own. Xhosa speakers in the Eastern Cape, for example, claim that the voices speak isiZulu. People may go into states of extreme agitation and run about and break things. In one case it was said that it took five men to hold down a 13-year-old sufferer (Edwards, 1984). Psychologists have identified *amafufunyana* possession as some kind of schizophrenic illness (Enskin, 1998; Niehaus, 2005) or some kind of disorder. For example, Enskin et.al. (1998) described *amafufunyana* as an extension of schizophrenia and compared it to white African cases of schizophrenia. As previously mentioned among Xhosa societies, it is regarded as a waste of time to refer a person with *amafufunyana* to hospital or psychiatric help. Those possessed by *amafufunyana* are usually referred to Church priests or traditional healers for exorcism.

### **The orthodox meaning of amakhosi**

The word *amakhosi* is not new among *amaXhosa* and has been in use for more than 40 years now in the Eastern Cape (the main difference is that the recent possession also called *amakhosi* is totally dissimilar from the orthodox one). As previously mentioned, *amakhosi* were widely understood by Xhosa people as the good spirits, as opposed to *amafufunyana*, which were understood as bad spirits. *Amakhosi* are said to be in the form of red ants (*imbovane*) which are mixed with other muti to perform certain spiritual purposes. The word 'Amakhosi' is a plural for the Zulu word *inkosi*, which means a king or a supernatural being and is similar to the word 'Nkosi' used by the Xhosa speaking people referring to a supernatural being (God or Chief).

The connection between the use of the word *amakhosi* seems to have an emphasis of power, control and influence; suggesting that it is a spirit that is more powerful than other spirits or is able to conquer all other spirits. *Amakhosi* are also called *amadoda amakhulu* (meaning superior men') and people would not speak ill of someone with *amakhosi*, as it was believed that they could hear. Due to power and superiority, *amakhosi* have also been associated with *ukukhuphuka* or *ukugquma* (the sound a lion makes before attacking). This probably explains why they have been used when delivering a person possessed by *amafufunyana*. *Amakhosi* are known to be indigenous spirits that come from the northern areas of South Africa in the 1960's and have since penetrated the ritual of *ukuthwasa* among the *amaXhosa* and *amaZulu*. This has led to the emergence of a certain type of *amagqirha* who identify themselves by wearing the red bead, while the old Xhosa *amagqirha* wore white beads. New *amakhosi* initiates were traditionally identified by wearing red cloth with the tiger printed on them and even today, those with *amakhosi* are still seen wearing their red clothes. In recent years, the presence of the traditional *amakhosi* has declined and there is only a

few healers and prophets who use *amakhosi*. Various reasons are given for this; some traditional healers say that *amakhosi* are difficult to manage in the sense that, as much as they follow instructions, they sometimes become stubborn and disobey the host. Some say that healers from outside South African have developed an easier way of healing and prophecy. Some say *amakhosi* have declined due to the fact that they were more popular among Zionist churches, which are declining and overshadowed by charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

During healing consultation, those who used *amakhosi* were known for using the isiZulu term *ukuthokoza* (literally meaning 'I agree' or 'it is so') instead of the isiXhosa term *camagu* (literally meaning 'I agree' or 'it is so'). Even though *amakhosi* were also associated with *ubugqirha*, they have always been regarded as lesser than *amagqirha*, because *ubugqirha* has always been known as a calling by ancestors, while *amakhosi* were regarded more as *ukuthwala* (to acquire), as anyone could acquire them. *Amakhosi* were more popular among Zionist churches, as Zionist priests also integrated them into their church services. *Amakhosi* were used for various reasons, including prophecy, healing, guidance and exorcism of evil spirits. *Amakhosi* were also used to heal people struggling with difficult problems, sickness and witchcraft and were also used to *ukukhupha isimnyama* (remove bad luck) and *umgqwaliso* (when one has been bewitched). *Amakhosi* used their special codes to pass instructions and warnings, which was understandable to the host, for example, when one was about to be in danger, the host would become scared to take a certain route and decide to take another route. Other examples are ears itching when people speak ill of the host or even dreams or vision.

*Amakhosi* healers did not necessarily prescribe traditional medicine, but instead use *imphepho* and water. Those Church leaders with *amakhosi* were known and respected among Zionist Churches due to their immense ability to prophesy and to see things that other people could not see. Most people did not know much about *amakhosi* and as result few people desired to have them. Even though *amakhosi* were not a calling from ancestors and anyone could have them, most people found it challenging, as people with *amakhosi* had to follow strict rules and rituals which were almost like not living a normal life. *Amakhosi* were known to speak languages that are foreign to the host, mostly isiZulu and others, even though the host is a Xhosa speaking person. They were sometimes visible and were kept in *amaselwa* (calabashes) and used *umlozi* or *impempe* (whistling) to communicate with their host. Everyone could hear the whistling, although the message could only be interpreted by the host. *Amakhosi* healers used to wear red and white beads and even the calabashes used to be covered by red and white beads. *Amakhosi* were said to be obedient and worked on instructions most of the time. *Amakhosi* have their own names, which describe their area of specialisation and duties, such as Ntombethongo (lady of dream), which refers to the interpretation of dreams, Magawulegoduka (chop while going home) meaning to act fast on any action required, or Zanendaba (come with the news) referring to fortune telling or prophecy.

### **The new form of *amakhosi***

Young people agreed that the current trend of *amakhosior amakhubalo* is a new form of possession and further argued that it is high in ranking and usually associated with *amakhubalo* or *amakhehle* (ancestors), which have always been part of the *amakhosi* family. This type of *amakhosi* does not necessarily need an *igqirha* (traditional healer), *ixhwele* (traditional herbalist) or an *amakhosi* specialist, but anybody who is possessed can be taught how to implant others with possession. However, for one to be able to perform different duties and scenarios, they would have to at least achieve a highest possessing of not less than ten types of *amakhosi*. Most of those who achieved a highest possession were usually given leadership roles and were called *iibaba* (meaning fathers) or *ibaba* (fathers in

singular). This type of *amakhosi* can also be borrowed from a friend and returned when one is done with them or no longer need them. For example, a young man can never go to initiation school with them. *Amakhubalo* do not withstand the affliction of pain and other treatment undergone during initiation. So the boys who go for initiation would normally borrow to their friends and then get them back when they return from initiation. After initiation, most of them do not really take the possession back, because after initiation they belong to a new group called *ubukrwala* (new manhood group) and does not need the possession. The popular opinion expressed by *amakrwala* is that *amakhosi yinto yamakhwenkwe hayi eyamadoda*, meaning that the *amakhosi* possession was a thing for boys (those not initiated) and not men (those initiated).

The *amakhosi* gatherings take place every night, sometimes as often as three times a week or when it is deemed necessary. These gatherings are held in the bush or hidden areas and only group members and the new recruits are allowed to attend and no one is allowed to talk about what happens there. Among other things, the activities include drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and dagga, performing different styles of different kinds of *amakhubalo*, teaching the new recruits how to make *amakhosi* perform *ukudabuka* (going high or doing performances). The *iibaba* as leaders were the ones responsible for giving instructions and guidelines to the group. Those who are at the stage of *ibaba* were the experienced and had direct connection and access to traditional healers and can operate as agents or recruiters that can possess others as well. The ages of the group ranged from ten to twenty years in both males and females. They are forbidden from eating food like ginger and fish and other seafood, as well as pork, because these are believed to be unclean.

### **How are *amakhosi/amakhubalo* acquired?**

Some learners acquire *amakhosi* from traditional healers, some from the *iibaba*, and others from peers. In most cases learners are referred to traditional headers or to *iibaba* by their friends. Most of them said, on the arrival to the healers they are then asked which type of possession they require and for what purpose? Sonwabo, said that when he arrived at the male traditional healer he knelt down and worshiped the healers by saying “*thokoza ngiyakhonza kuwe mkhululu ngize ngenkinga* (isiZulu language) (I worship you elder and I have come to you with a problem). The healer responded by saying “*noma hini leyo uzengayo uzothoal usizo ngona lana kukwasiz’abantu*” (whatever problem you are here for, it will be solved because this place is where people are helped. Thando said that in his case it was the friend who recommended him who first went in the traditional healer to explain his problem and then called him in later. When Thando entered, the healer told him that he already heard from Senzo (his friend) that he was troubled by neighbours at home and that he needed assistance to fight for himself and he said it was true. Some said when they arrived it was the healer who told them what they were there for and asked them if it was true and in most cases the healer was right. Zonke said he was surprised but also impressed when the healer told him exactly why he was there, for him this was a sign that the healer was not a fake but a real one.

On their arrival learners would then put down in front of the healer an amount of money which was more than R 50. Some said at first they put R 50, some said R 100 while some said R 200. it was then explained to them that the first amount was for the beginning of the ritual and later on they had to pay more money which added up to R300. After the initial payment is made, some form of ritual is usually conducted, which involves a bottle of white brandy, a stout beer and a white chicken. It is said that when a person pays the full amount of money and performs *amakhubalo* rituals, they are then given a powder enclosed in a small bottle worn on a beaded necklace, or rubbed into a goatskin bangle. For instance, when Kwanele was asked how *amakhosi* are installed in a person, he responded: “You must bring three bottles of milk stout, three cigarettes, a bottle of old buck gin/Smirnoff and

a white chicken". When asked who will drink it, Siphwiwo responded 'the elders'. When asked who the elders were, most participants responded that the elders were ancient spirits residing inside people who had *amakhosi* in them. Luzuzo further narrated that: "The *amakhosi* are ancient spirits who find a home in a person's body; the person will drink the brandy, but in actual fact it will be the ancient spirits called *amakhehle* (ancient or ancestors) who will be drinking through the person".

The initial sample of the *muthi* is said to cost as little as R5, but if one wanted a more potent version, they need to take a bottle of brandy or a white chicken to the herbalist or traditional healer. To get the potency of the *muthi* renewed or increased, it costs anything from R50 to R250 and it was also the same in Khayelitsha in Cape Town (*West Cape News*, 2012). Some learners said that it costs R50 to be introduced to the *amakhubalo* by drinking *muthi* mixed with brandy and beer. This is not the end of the process though, as there is a further R300 that needs to be paid by the person to accept them and the person then has to stop eating food with oil for a period of seven days and thereafter must not eat sea food and pork. When asked about the prohibition on eating certain foods, Siphwo responded: "It was crucial for people with *amakhosi* to abstain from foods that were regarded as unclean by the ancient spirits"/ Siphwo responded in the same manner as other informants that certain foods, especially fish and pork, were regarded as *inqambi* (unclean) by the ancient spirits and were not allowed to be consumed by those with *amakhosi*. Some learners further noted that some foods prevented the work of *amakhosi*, hence there was a need to avoid them.

### **What are the main reasons for *amakhosi* possession?**

**In summary, most of the learners cited the following reasons for attaining *amakhosi* possession:**

#### **Protection from witchcraft**

It is believed that in townships, the practice of witchcraft is quite high. "People are witching each other all the time and for me I am safe due to protections by *amakhubalo*" said one of the participants. The youth believe that *amakhosi* give them protection; as a result, they cannot be bewitched.

#### **Getting attention from the opposite sex**

Some learners believe that *amakhosi* gives them *ihozahoza* (being liked by the opposite sex); as a result, they are able to lure the opposite sex into relationships. Some believe that one can take over one's girlfriend or boyfriend when using *amakhosi*. The *amakhosi* owned by boys to impress girls are called 'charmer boy' and those owned by girls to impress boys are called *ma-Rose*. There was no form of homosexuality mentioned among them. According to both boys and girls, they just have to stare at the target and they will automatically develop feelings for them. They also practise on each other during their gatherings.

#### **Having supernatural powers**

Luzuko said: "Having supernatural and spiritual powers means one can do impossible things without fear." According to most participants, supernatural powers are magical and unusual acts that a normal person would not usually be able to do. In township communities, where alcohol and drugs are easily available to under-aged children, the availability of these commodities places those who live in these communities at higher risk of violent encounters. The learners strongly believe that *amakhosi* had supernatural powers that enabled them to do impossible performance such as magic, climbing walls, jumping high fences and others.



### **For academic purposes**

Some learners believe that *amakhosi* helps one to reason better and do well in their studies. Some said that even without studying, one is able to obtain high marks. In addition, the students also claimed that *amakhosi* protected them from those who use *muthi* during examinations. Due to *amakhosi* possession, learners can have the ability to visualise the examination paper with answers before receiving it from the examiner, which enables them to pass.

### **To be accepted by peers**

Some learners said that they acquired *amakhosi* because it was a cool thing to do and most learners had them. Some learners regarded *amakhosi* as one of the strongest township cultures that one did not need to be rich to be a part of. Snako said: "Since I joined *amakhosi*, I feel that I now belong and in the *amakhosi* group I find friends who understand me". Nosizi, one of the girls, said: "My neighbours are well-to-do and as a result, their children attend multiracial schools in town. Because I come from a poor family, I am not allowed to befriend them. In the *amakhosi* group, I find youth who are struggling like me and as result I find people who understand my poverty struggles". *Amakhosi* are a strong group among boys and girls, especially for boys who have not gone to initiation practice. Few of them continue after initiation, as most would then belong to *amakwala* groups for initiated males, where *amakhosi* is not popular.

### **Winning fights and bullying**

Most learners who are possessed by *amakhosi* said they needed *amakhosi* for protection from bullies. The informants believed that with the help of the type of *amakhosi* called *Bawo Ngonyama* (lion), one becomes powerful during fighting. Some learners said that due to high levels of bullying in schools, the *amakhosi*-possessed learners have the ability to protect some of their siblings and friends from bullies.

### **Prophecy and warning**

Learners believed that the *amakhosi* were helpful in giving signals when one was about to encounter danger. Luzuko said: "With the help of *amakhosi*, I can feel when danger is about to take place and I can warn my friends". Some said that other peers would come to them for consultation and for warnings of bad things that would happen to them. Siphos said: "I always give my friends free advice; I do not charge them, for me it feels good when I can see things they cannot see". Some said *amakhosi* can also be used to find something that is lost. Zizipho said: "When you have *amakhosi*, the girls love you and enjoy your company. Even when they lose something like their phone, they can come to you, because you will be guided by the *amakhosi* spirit to tell them where the phone is and who took it".

### **Background of learners possessed by *amakhosi***

Most of learners who were possessed are mostly males, while a few are females. An estimate of around 60 to 70 learners from all schools belonged to the *amakhosi* groups. Most learners come from poor families and as a result they were either staying at the informal settlements or at the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses. Their household members were mainly domestic workers, gardeners and unskilled workers, while most were unemployed. Most of their households were led by grandparents who depend on social grants. Some of these learners were either raised by their relatives or by single mothers and grandparents. Very few of them were staying with both their parents. Some of them came from child-headed households where it was their siblings who had to find ways to support them and sometimes depended on neighbours for food. For instance, one of the girls said that she was responsible for supporting three of her siblings, as her mother was an alcoholic and she made money by shoplifting at Mdantsane City Mall and *amakhosi* were helping her not to get caught.

Some of them said that nobody really cared whether they slept at home or not and as a result, they had ample time to practice *amakhosi* performances. Others confessed that they possess *amakhosi* to be invisible during theft, since they have limited resources in their homes to satisfy their needs. They also desire the same status as their peers from well-off families. A large number of possessed learners live in an area called Nkomponi near NU 9, which is an area made up of RDP houses where there is a high rate of crime and more serious incidents of violent behaviour. Most of those from that area said that they needed *amakhosi* for protection, since that area is known for serious crimes, ranging from robbery to violent crimes by gangsters. Nkomponi is a prominent youth residence, which suggests that the kids were living by themselves or with friends of their same age, without adult guidance.

Some of these learners are less concerned about future, while others are concerned, but do not know where they will end up. When asked about their aspirations and future plans, Luzuko answered: "Future, what future? Do you honestly think I will live until I am 30? I doubt that". Lolo, one of the girls, said: "Future? Look at my mother, she has matric (grade 12), but she lives in poverty, look at my sister, she was involved in politics, but she is still struggling. I am not sure where I will end up; maybe I will be just like them". When asked about her future plans, Lolo said: "I am just here at school studying, because my mother wants me to study. I don't see any future in studying; I am just here to let time pass by". Siphwiwo said: "Future? The truth is that I have not thought about that".

## Discussion

### ***Amakhosi* as spiritual phenomenon?**

One can conclude that *amakhosi* possession is a spiritual phenomenon due to two reasons. Firstly, that its source is considered to be a spiritual phenomenon and secondly, that those possessed and their community considers it a 'spiritual' occurrence. *Amakhubalo*, which are part of the orthodox family of *amakhosi*, are considered the major influence of the current *amakhosi* possession. As discussed earlier, *amakhosi* were said to be good spirits who were used to exorcise bad spirits which were *amafufunyana*. Further, that they were also used by those who wanted to be healers and most of them from Zionist churches. *Amakhosi* have always been understood to be a spiritual phenomenon and even though there is no strong relationship between the old and new trend, one cannot exclude the new phenomenon from being spiritual. In addition to that, the kids themselves and the communities perceive this new form as spiritual and as a result the schools always relied on religious leaders and traditional healers for guidance in dealing with *amakhosi*. Taking advice from Lewis (1971), it is not up to us to judge who is and who is not possessed. If a person is generally considered possessed in their own cultural setting, then we should consider them possessed as well. According to young people with *amakhosi*, this is a spiritual experience and it is related to their identity as African people with a strong relationship with their ancestors. This *amakhosi* possession is also called *amakhehle* or *abadala* (elders or ancestors).

Furthermore, there are various rituals and laws to follow, including what and what not to eat and places not to go when one has joined the group. As noted by Swarts (2009: 36-37) and Simon & Vincent (2014: 74) in South Africa there is a lot of psychological pain and despair due to unrealised dreams and many young black South Africans and township youth have become victims of exclusion in the new South Africa. Due to the fact that they have been failed by the current political system, they resort to spirituality and some mysterious experience which makes them earn recognition and respect in the society. Various studies (Lewis 1971 ; Amjad and Bokharey, 2014:25; Lysne and Wachholtz, 2013; Dlanjwa, 2015; Glasson 2009) have also shown that, in most cases, people turn to a metaphysical higher power, supernatural powers or spirituality when failed by the system and when going through trauma and abuse. This is what Glasson (2009) calls a 'spirituality of survival'.

This study also shows that to some extent this phenomenon is associated with some strange and unexplained behaviour, even though to a lesser extent than portrayed in the media, but there is a strong spiritual element involved. One must not rule out or deny their strong spiritual meaning, as such an attitude of denial can result in strong satanic elements where kids kill themselves, their friends and family members, just like in recent cases like the one in a Gauteng school where two grade 10 boys ranging between 13 and 15 years old killed a girl in Lukhanyo secondary school near Randfontein (news on SABC 1, 6 March 2013) and other incidents in provinces such as the Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal.

### **Amakhosi as social phenomenon**

One can also conclude that this possession is more of a social than a spiritual phenomenon. During this study, the researchers never observed any dramatic occurrences as portrayed in the media. Furthermore, even teachers responded that they had never seen dramatic performances which were due to *amakhosi* possession. Yes, there were instances of bullying, disobedience of teachers and unruly behaviours associated with the *amakhosi* groups, but it was not as dramatic as portrayed in the media, for instance there was no climbing of the walls and walking on the roof with bare hands. Some of the parents agreed to notice the odd behaviour from the children who were possessed by *amakhosi*, but it was not in the same manner as portrayed by newspapers. The observations of the teachers, parents and the researcher shows that this is more of a controlled behaviour, rather than a spiritual one which is supposed to exert control by itself, as other spiritual possessions do, such as *amafufunyana*, *intwaso yobugqirha* or other spirits already discussed.

One can argue that the need to want possession is more related to learners experiencing feelings such as rejection, failure, discouragement, hunger and lack of purpose. The possession seems to make them feel significant, noticed and accepted by all around them. Other learners feel that they underperform at school and believe that *amakhosi* possession would help them to perform better. Some are hungry and want to support themselves and some are being bullied and abused and want to stand up and fight for themselves.

As already mentioned, most of the *amakhosi* members are not involved in any extra mural activities like sport, music, drama or church and they find meaning and life in the *amakhosi* group. For them it is a source of socialisation. The fact that the boys cannot go to initiation school with *amakhosi* and no longer belong to the *amakhosi* possession groups after returning from initiation shows that this is, more than anything, a socialisation process. After initiation they now belong to the *ubukrwala* group, which is a socialisation group for initiation graduates. After initiation, they now regard themselves as men and grown-ups and can have nothing to do with *amakhosi*, which is associated with the uncircumcised and children. Our main contention is that *amakhosi* are more like other popular youth cultures like street gangs (observed all over the world), *amakwala* groups observed in South African (Ntombana, 2009) and *i'khothane* subculture. For example, *i'khothane* subculture practice revolves around the conspicuous accumulation and consumption of expensive material just for attention and to be noticed, although most of them are not from well-off families and are also not employed (Howell and Vincent, 2014:60). By buying the most expensive clothes and labels, the *i'khothane* are making a statement and showing what they can now afford, which is a way of configuring a post-apartheid identity (Howell and Vincent, 2014:72).

On the other hand, street gangs in South Africa, which have recently been more prevalent in coloured communities, are said to function as a symbol of resistance to externally imposed identities (Petrus, 2013:77). The *amakhosi* scenario is related to the fact that in order to acquire a strong and healthy ego-identity, the young person must receive consistent and meaningful recognition of his achievements and accomplishments. It is possible that whatever behaviour the students have shown is normal and can be done by any person who

is desperate and seeking attention, which could be the case here. The wall climbing that was observed is something that any normal person can do, especially if that act would make them popular and celebrated.

The findings of this study also suggest that most of these children come from poor families and disadvantaged areas such as informal settlements and RDP houses, where there is a high level of crime. For instance, the NU9, where one of the most affected schools is situated, is an informal settlement called Manyano. Nkomponi has RDP houses where there is a high level of crime and NU 3 is home to a notorious gang called Fifty Niggers that specialises in criminal activities around Mdantsane. Most boys also confirmed that in such areas one has to belong to a group or a gang in order to survive and be protected from being a victim of crime, like robbery or even stabbing. *Amakhosi* act as an individual protection and are respected by peers and the possessed feel protected and powerful.

One of the major issues that have to be noted is that these kids have not been integrated into the so called 'new' South African. At their level, they do not see themselves as residents of South Africa, but as Mdantsane boys and girls. Most of them are not like some other well-travelled kids who attend multi-racial schools in East London. Most of them only go to East London a few times and only during Christmas with their parents in order to buy clothes, while some go for criminal activities ranging from stealing and robbery. In their perception, schooling is not really a means for a better future, but just a reason to go and have a place where they can spend their time. Education is not a means of acquiring knowledge, but just a place for *ukuhambisa ixesha* (just to spend time), as they put it. Most of them do not believe they will go to grade 12, let alone undertake tertiary education.

The fact that this possession is more prevalent in township schools and not in schools located in cities and in multiracial schools is itself an indication of a social phenomenon. These children feel rejected as they see the big gap between them and those who are at multi-racial schools, since most children of affluent families now study in the city. The numbers of students in their schools decreased and those few left may feel like rejects and get frustrated. The act of being possessed can be an answer to lift them up and be recognised, which seems to be in line with socio-cultural theory which suggested that abnormal behaviour may have more to do with social ills or failures of society than with problems within the individual. This suggests that the act of *amakhosi* is a symptom of social class, racial, ethnic and cultural background and hence it is prevalent in township schools which are predominantly attended by the poorest of the society who are also from the lower class.

It is also interesting to find out that most of the possessed kids do not have a strong family support. Most of the kids who were involved in *amakhosi* were from single parent families, while some are from households headed by women, some are raised by their grandparents and others are from child headed households. Very few of them were from households with both parents. Even for those who had both their grandparents, the grandparents were already too old to enforce discipline. This shows a situation where kids grow without proper guidance and a situation where there is a lack of fatherhood and boys grow up without strong guidance and role models. This also explains why such kids disobey their teachers and also why they have ample time to be involved in *amakhosi*, as they have lots of free time and they do not have to be home at a certain time to perform chores. The current epidemic is certainly closely connected to the marginalisation and vulnerability of township youth in Mdantsane and the widening gap between social expectations and everyday realities. Taking on a spirit and socialising with 'possessed' teenagers offers youth access to a social identity and status that appears to allow them to overcome adversity and offers hope for a successful self-image.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this paper is that *amakhosi* are a spiritual phenomenon that is mainly the result of social problems in various the Southan African communities. As already noted, from an African perspective there is no difference between what is physical and what is spiritual, life is viewed as a whole. For example, there is no difference between religion and culture, physical and metaphysical and there is a strong connection between the living and the dead. The spiritual problems have a strong impact on the 'unspiritual' issues and vice versa. Even though Lewis received a lot of criticism with his spiritual model related to poverty, the fact remains that when people are depressed and suppressed they start having spiritual problems and also when people have spiritual problems, they start having social problems. The contention here is that this study shows a strong relationship between a 'social' and a 'spiritual' phenomenon and this leads one to conclude that *amakhosi* possession is a spiritual phenomenon that is a result of a socio-economic problem. *Amakhosi* are also not just a possession like in the case of *amafufunyana* coming upon a person and cases described by Lewis in studies where a certain spirit attacks vulnerable groups. This trend of possession is also totally different from the orthodox *amakhosi* that were used by Zionists to heal or exorcise bad spirits. It is more related to the concept of *ukuthwala* where one acquires some supernatural powers to be rich, to be protected or to be a healer.

Spiritual possession has been known to possess or attack a certain group or individuals. In this case, it is the young people themselves who go and buy the possession. These young people do not just wake up with possession, but they go either to their peers or to some traditional healers and pay money in order to get the possession. There are similarities to the discussion by Lewis in the sense that these young people share a similar need, but the main difference is that most of these kids choose the possession. Furthermore, despite their situation in life, the fact that that they go out to get *amakhosi* indicates a generation of people who are trying to help themselves and are trying to earn recognition and space in society. This possession phenomenon speaks to the reality of most township youth, like the *isikhothane* cases of youth who have been shaped by a historical narrative of oppression and current reality of democracy that has not brought change and has only benefited a few. This kind of phenomenon does not only need to be confronted through prayers and consultation by traditional healers, it needs a holistic approach which requires various stakeholders to seek ways to address socio-economic exclusion narratives.

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