Audio file

[6\_Intimate Rite Raffaela Taylor Seymourn.mp3](https://unioxfordnexus-my.sharepoint.com/personal/admn5769_ox_ac_uk/Documents/Transcribed%20Files/6_Intimate%20Rite%20Raffaela%20Taylor%20Seymourn.mp3)

Transcript

Hello. Hello, hello.

Welcome to the Oxford Anthropology Podcast.

You're listening, you're listening. To the Oxford Anthropology Podcast.

.

Hello you are listening to a podcast episode of the University of Oxford Departmental Seminar. My name is Peyton Cherry, a DPhil Anthropology student at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. The title of the seminar is *Intimate rites: ancestors and queer kinship in Zimbabwe*, given by Raffaela Taylor-Seymourn. Raffaela is a junior research fellow at Pembroke College at the University of Oxford. This talk examines the engagements with ancestral spirits among young queer Zimbabweans. Please enjoy the seminar.

It was a hot February day in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 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 centre. They were casually but stylishly dressed, both wearing blue jeans and leather jackets. On this occasion we were discussing the signs that they had detected over the past year that led them to suspect that Lindiwe might have an ancestral calling, as they termed it.

“There was a particular dream where a snake started talking to me,” Lindiwe remembered, her voice bright with intrigue. “It said ‘I have a gift for you.’ I told Zandia about it, she wasn't sure, but she thought the snake could mean I have an Amakhosi. When Zandia mentioned the word Amakhosi, Zandile pursed her lips and nodded. It was a serious and intimidating prospect.

Amakhosi is a [local] term for powerful ancestral spirits who watch over their descendants and promote their flourishing by bestowing gifts like healing, fertility, and the restoration of balance in relations between people. This painting is by the South African artist Helen Zabidi and depicts the webs of relations that exist between Amakhosi and their descendants. Amakhosi 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. I use these in the Nbele terms, which is the most widely spoken language in Bulawayo, as umbrella categories to encompass the variety of distinctions relating to spirits and spiritual occupations across Zimbabwe. The image on the right of this slide shows the animal and plant based medicines of a sangoma and animal hides that they use when channelling spirits. The forms of healing that sangomas provide are as much social and psychological as they are focused on the body. In their own narratives, Sangoma stressed that their gifts come from Amakhosi, who choose them for the vocation and with whom they develop deep and unique relationships.

Against the backdrop of social landscape dominated by Christian churches, however, Amakhosi and their sangoma mediums are widely perceived to be both spiritually dangerous and socially backwards. I will describe the history that accounts for this later, but the striking resurgence of interest in ancestral practises among young queer people stands out from other young Zimbabweans patterns of religious engagement. Not only are many queer people searching for information about ancestors, but a growing number experience ancestral spirits trying to communicate with them. Those like Lindiwe contemplate the possibility they have been chosen by ancestral spirits to work as their mediums. An ancestral calling, as she described it.

The image on this slide was painted by an interlocutor named Maria, who you will meet later. I used this painting several times in my talk today as it depicts the closeness that many of my interlocutors feel with their spirits. In this sense, it reflects the thrust of my talk, which examines one key element of the resurgence of interest in ancestors. The qualities of kinship that relations with ancestral spirits offer. Before I get to my ethnography, let me take you back to the beginning of my research and explain how this project emerged. I have been conducting field work in Bulawayo since 2012.

Bulawayo is a city of about 500,000 people and the capital of the minority in the Nbele speaking region of Matabeleland. Having worked on a variety of projects in the city over the course of several years, I first came to work with queer rights organisations 6 years ago. I have personal stakes in queer politics, but I was conscious of how fraught these issues are in Zimbabwe. The country's former President Robert Mugabe, who ruled from independence in 1980 until the coup that removed him from power in 2017, spearheaded a new genre of political homophobia in the 1990s that would be taken out by leaders across the continent.

However, as I became familiar with the landscape of sexual rights activism in Bulawayo, I came to appreciate that the city has a streak of contrarianism and is generally thought to be more tolerant of difference than other places in Zimbabwe. Equally as the country's second city and historically opposed to the ruling party, people are often critical of Mugabe's style of politics. As I came to know members of sexual rights organisations in the city, I would come to see that religiosity is a lacuna in both popular and academic accounts of queer life in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the region. In conversations with key interlocutors, I designed a project that queried two powerful lines of argument that frequently undermined the agency of queer Zimbabweans as religious subjects. On the one hand, many local religious and political leaders like Mugabe frame queer intimacies and gender transgression as inherently un-African at odds with both indigenous traditions and Christianity.

In this telling, heterosexuality is the bedrock of an authentic culture that existed prior to colonisation, and homosexuality is a modern, external and secularising threat. On the other hand, the global gay rights movement has responded to this kind of rhetoric with high profile campaigns to promote LGBT rights across the continent. These campaigns frequently portray queer Africans as victims of religious persecution, while Western identity based frameworks are presented as a tool for queer liberation regardless of context. Against this backdrop, my research approach has religious life as a vital arena of queer creativity and resilience in Zimbabwe.

On this slide are some of the murals that my interlocutors painted on the walls of one of the organisations they founded. It almost goes without saying that when I enter these spaces, my position as a white European woman is marked as it is in every space I enter in Zimbabwe. Some people simply have little interest in engaging with me because of this. But I also found that people often assumed that as a white person in queer spaces. I was automatically an ally at the very least, to borrow the language of queer activism. It was partly for. This reason that I found my status as an outsider often positioned me as a confidant.

From early on, I decided that if I was to build relationships with queer people in Bulawayo, they could not just be for the purposes of research over the course of a few years, but would become lifelong attachments. Moreover, the research itself concern topics interested,that interested many people I worked with, kin, spirits, ancestors, intimacy, and in this sense the research was and is part of an ongoing conversation. There is one final point that I want to make about positionality, one that's rarely discussed in ethnographic research. As you will hear later in the talk, many of my interlocutors have been bereaved. This proved to be an unanticipated point of commonality that I shared with some people. As many of my close relatives passed away during my teenage years and early adulthood, beginning with my mother. As the image on this slide undermines, showing a placard made for transgender day of remembrance in 2019, grief and mourning are unfortunately all too common dimensions of queer life.

Moreover, many of my interlocutors are of the generation whose parents were most affected by the HIV pandemic, and many lost parents to this and others health system failings in the 2000s. Experiences of bereavement and grief, would frequently prove pivotal, a shared point of understanding that paved the way to frank discussions about family and loss, as well as musings about intimacy and desire. Before I get to the ethnography, I want to give a sense of Zimbabwe's religious landscape and highlight in particular the charged relationship many young people have with ancestors. Since the country's colonisation by Cecil Rhodes as British South Africa Company in the late 19th century, spiritual practises involving ancestors have been pushed further and further to the margins of public life.

In the 1890s, mass uprisings against colonial rule were largely spearheaded by religious figures like Sangomas. In response, colonial authorities incarcerated and executed many prominent spiritual leaders. This photograph is of the sangomas, Nehanda and Jacobi and was taken in Salisbury Gaol several months before their execution in 1898. Today, this is probably the most famous single image in Zimbabwe, a symbol of the profound injustices of the colonial era and the struggles for liberation that they inspired. The uprisings of the 1890s led to the criminalisation of essentially all practises involving ancestors under the guise of stamping out superstition and belief in witchcraft. During the subsequent decades, Zimbabweans were subject to displacement, dispossession and land alienation on a scale that the historian Terrence Ranger described as unparalleled anywhere else in central and southern Africa. Though white settlers never made-up more than 4% of the population, the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 formally gave white farmers control of over 50% of the country's territory and the entirety of the most arable land. The areas shown in light yellow on this map. The loss of land severed access to the burial sites of ancestors and undermined ties between people and place that ancestral spirits helped to mediate. At the same time, the spread of Christianity and the modernising impulses of both the colonial state and the post colonial socialist order continued to chisel away at the social significance and moral status of our ancestral practises. As illustrated in this newspaper cartoon appearing from the 1980s, published in a government paper not long after independence, traditional practitioners are often characterised as both fearsome and backwards. In the decades since, Pentecostal churches have demonised ancestral practises as never before, framing ancestors as satanic beings who threaten the health and well-being of the living.

Today, unlike in neighbouring South Africa, where traditional spiritual practitioners have greater social standing, in urban Zimbabwe talking openly about consulting with a sangoma or soliciting help from Anakhosi is a delicate matter that few publicly admit to. When young people undertake to learn about Anakhosi and forge relationships with them, they are driven to seek out people and ideas they have been taught to shun. This forces them to revise ideas about spiritual benevolence and the morality of different kinds of spirits. This image, like the one earlier, is by Helen Zabidi. I find it helpful because it depicts the tangle of relations between the living and the dead, as well as those who turn their backs on ancestors. When they begin engaging with ancestors, my interlocutors often discover that it begins to rearrange many of their relationships. These engagements distance them from some of their closest living relatives as they strive to learn about most modes of spiritual practise that for the most part their parents explicitly sought to avoid passing on to them.

At the same time, however, I'd suggest that it opens up possibilities for alternative experiences of kinship. In my talk today, I approached my interlocutors’ relationships with spirits through the lens of queer kinship. When I use the term queer, I refer to gender and sexual transgression in a broad sense existing relative to the norms of any given context at a particular historical juncture. The idiom of kinship has a vexed history in queer studies, and many scholars remain apprehensive about embracing kinship as an analytic for queer life. In Kath Weston's 1991 ‘Families who choose’, she famously outlined the notion of chosen family as a central idiom of queer kinship in the United States. Weston's book was part of a broader shift away from classical anthropological approaches, which had understood kinship to refer to the rules that underpin the genealogical grid. At the same time, new studies showed how kinship was not simply given, but cumulatively constructed through acts of care, sustenance, and cohabitation. In Weston's work, those relations that had previously been considered fictive, that is, chosen families, were shown to be just as real and meaningful as those prescribed by the rules of affiliation.

Despite Western's influence, many in queer studies remain wary of the analytic of kinship. This is partly because of the role played by kinship norms in reproducing hegemonic forms of intimacy and gender, namely, the couple form heterosexual reproduction and normative gender roles. Judith Butler raised the question ‘is kinship always already heterosexual?’ Elizabeth Povinelli invoked the image of gridlock to describe the difficulties of working with the idiom of kinship and its ability to capture intimacy within normative structures. Recently, Kagura Macharia expressed, “I remain convinced that kinship refuses forms of intimate innovation.” In order to avoid projecting the assumptions that come with the lens of kinship, many queer studies have turned instead to analytics such as intimacy and relationality. I suggest that part of the difficulty of defying the idiom of kinship is that it indexes 2 distinct things. On the one hand, it is used to describe hegemonic forms of intimacy and the normative relations that accompany them. That is, the power that rules of affinity and consanguinity have to shape expectations of kinship. On the other hand, the idiom of kinship is often used to gesture to the felt qualities that many people crave. Intimacy, stability, care, affection, understanding. When kinship becomes a source of pain and struggle, it is often because of the disjunctures between these two sets of expectations. Between norms and desires.

As I describe, shifting patterns of relations between queer people and spirits in Bulawayo, instead of jettisoning the concept of kinship altogether. I used my. Ethnography to grapple with the tensions that exist between ideas about kinships and expectations of experiences of queer life. I argue that we need ways to think with, between, and against the frictions that surround the terms kinship and queerness. While the norms of kinship continuously were to structure patterns of intimacy, the desires that accompany them can be channelled towards other non hegemonic forms of queer intimacy. I suggest that the relations might interlocutors form with spirits or to be read as distinctively clear ways of practising kinship in the sense that they embody the very forms of intimate innovation. But Macharia describes ultimately, these relations help foster novel subjectivities and work to imagine the world otherwise.

In the following three sections, I focus on the experiences of three interlocutors in Bulawayo. Maria, Kantenda, and Izaki. As I narrate their experiences with family and spirits, I explore how they deploy and resist idioms of family and how they inhabit and transgress normative structures and forms of relationality. Maria's choice and family. When you're LGBT in Zimbabwe, you're taken to healers and prophets to try to fix you over and over again, Maria told me. Maria is a queer woman in her early 30s who had first met five years ago. On this occasion, she was recalling her encounters with a number of sangomas throughout her teenage years and early adulthood. This kind of experience is common among young queer people in Bulawayo. My interlocutors’ parents were mostly Christian, were, when confronted with their child's gender transgression that spiritual allegiances often are often revealed to be more complex. Maria became aware of this when she was 15 and her mother decided she was too masculine for a teenage girl refusing to wear dresses and slouching too much. After exhausting a series of Christian churches and pastors, first her own Dutch Reformed congregation, then a number of independent Apostolic prophets, her mother eventually sought out a sangoma to resolve which 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 images on this slide depict the kind of scene that Maria would have encountered, showing the tools and clothes sangomas used in their consultations. In these encounters, Sangomas frequently attributed Maria's queerness to the presence of an ancestral spirit of the opposite gender who had chosen her as their host. As we have heard Anakhosi, are ancestral spirits who single out certain of their descendants to act as their mediums. And Anakhosi are understood to exert an especially powerful influence over the lives of their mediums, affecting everything from their diet to their mannerisms, their dress to their intimate desires. As such, expressions of queerness can be viewed as indicative of the presence of a powerful spirit that affects who their host is attracted to and how they express themselves. From this perspective, gender expression and sexual orientation might be influenced by the presence of Anakhosi.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, a number of anthropologists drew on examples like this to argue that roles like the Sangoma could be read as an epistemic framework for describing and accommodating gendered and sexual difference. This work was intended as a counterpoint to the rhetoric of the likes of Mugabe. However, the existence of what might be termed a local or African epistemology of queerness doesn't straightforwardly reflect the lived experiences of young queer person today. As Maria recalled, I remember this one woman was like. I'm seeing a kulu, a grandfather spirit. But I had no idea what she was talking about. Maria found visiting Sangomas during her teenage years confusing and unsettling. She'd had little exposure to ancestral cosmologies growing up and these explanations didn't concur with her experience of her sexuality. Ultimately, she dismissed the interpretations they provided. At the same time, Maria found her way into Bulawayo's queer community. As she entered adulthood, Maria discovered Zimbabwe's foremost sexual rights organisation, which had just established its first office in the city. It was in this space that she encountered other queer people for the first time, as well as the identity based frameworks and English language categories circulated by the global gay rights movement. Unlike the words alluding to queerness in Zimbabwe's indigenous languages, which are pathologizing and almost exclusively used as slurs, she. Recalled that English. Language words precisely describe different vectors of gendered and sexual variation. As she told me,

“When I first heard the word lesbian I was like, whoa. So there is a word for this.”

Over the subsequent decades, she made a career out of promoting queer rights. By the time we met five years ago, she frequently led workshops with titles like challenging boxes and binaries, where she introduced people to the shifting subtleties of English language semantics surrounding gender and sexual identity. Away from her professional life, however, Maria still grappled with tense family dynamics. She and her two siblings had been raised by her mother after her father left when she was two months old. They lived in one of Bulawayo's lower income neighbourhoods in a one bedroom house, she and her sister sharing the bathroom with their mother and her brother, sleeping on the living room floor.

Like many of the members of queer rights organisations that I worked with, Maria grew up in a lower income area on the West side of the city that had been a Township prior to independence. This reflects the reality that queer people from middle class backgrounds have access to forms of mobility and private space that make them less reliant on the amenities provided by sexual rights organisations. When she was 21 Maria wrote letters to her mother, brother and sister coming out. Each of them reacted badly. Maria's sister told her she didn't believe her. Rather, she insisted Maria was using what she described as lesbianism, as a cover for promiscuous relationships with men. Her brother never acknowledged having received the letter, but stopped talking to her for several years and her mother told her that the only option was prayer each week, asking the congregation at her church to pray for her wayward daughter.

By the time I met Maria, she was a leading figure in the queer feminist organisation that she ran with five other queer women. She continued to live with her mother. In fact, the two still shared a bedroom, but there was little affection in their relationship. When I visited their home, her mother sat on the sofa and ordered Maria around in a stern voice. The strain in their relationship was evident. All of this seemed to indicate that Maria had drifted away from religious life. Both her mother's Christian Church going and the difficult experiences she'd had in spaces associated with ancestral practises. But in private, Maria described the presence of ancestral spirits to me in her life, in vivid and visceral terms. “I began to accept my calling,” she said. “I rejected it for a long time, but I just realised that this thing is not going away. It's real. It's got a heartbeat, limbs. Somehow I have to accept that my ancestors have chosen me.” As I mentioned earlier, Maria is a talented artist who renders her spirits and paintings. This image is a depiction of her kulu, or grandfather spirit. For Maria, embracing ancestral spirituality didn't mean accepting the notion that ancestral spirits were a cause of queerness. Although the notion that Anakhosi alter gender and sexual expression might appear to pave the way to benevolent understandings of queerness, it rarely reflects how queer people experience themselves. For Maria, such accounts serve to reinforce pathologising attitudes that suggest gender and sexual expression can, and ideally should, be altered. Instead, she embraced English language frameworks. In doing so, she selectively deployed English language models of gender and sexuality. And use them to engage with ancestral cosmologies on her own terms. Central to understanding this turn around in Maria's perspective on ancestral spirituality and that of other young queer people is the idiom of choice operative in relations with spirits. Unlike with living relatives, where knowledge of sexual identity might result in the severance or weakening of kinship relations, ancestral spirits choose to build ties with young queer people.

As Maria explained to me, “From my perspective, Anakhosi see a person's heart and go where they're comfortable. Anakhosi will be thinking if I sit on this person can they fully carry the burden? Not everyone can handle the burden, but they know who can.” Indeed, Maria and others described that their interest in ancestral spirituality is rarely a choice that they make for themselves. This is because the living are not the primary agents of choice in relations with spirits. Instead, the spirits choose and their living hosts are meant to have no choice but to oblige.

This slide shows another painting by Helen Zabedi, which depicts a grandmother ancestor choosing a living descendant to be her medium underlying how powerful this gesture is. Ancestors choose their hosts from among the wide range of their living descendants, looking in particular for someone who will set aside their own needs and desires in order to undertake the wishes of the spirit. Sangomas maintained that failing to accept a calling will result in endless personal hardship. As spirits relentlessly seem to assert their authority. Moreover, because ancestral spirits have the capacity to see things that are hidden and know people's secrets many of my interlocutors joke with ancestral spirits are the only people they never had to come out to because they knew everything about them before choosing them.

Maria summed up what this form of choice meant to her, that quality of being accepted as you are makes it easier to want to connect to the ancestors and nurture a relationship with them. “They chose me.” For many of my interlocutors, this is the first experience of having relatives, in this case distant ancestors who actively embraced their gender and sexual expression. The experience of being chosen is a powerful affirmation of their value and abilities. Relations with spirits can be read as a distinctive form of chosen family, an idiom that, as we've seen, has been central to anthropological accounts of queer kinship. Here the idiom of choice similarly serves to foster intimate ties and deepen the feeling of kinship. However, in crucial ways it differs from the account provided by Weston. In this relationship, the ancestral spirit is the agentive party recruiting their chosen host into a lifelong, unequal and dependent relationship they are not able to refuse. In this sense, the idiom of choice differs from that of the Euro-American account of queer kinship, in which an unencumbered subject, is free of relations. At the same time, Maria and her Kulu were already kin. Ancestors are the bedrock of classical anthropological accounts of kinship. In many African contexts, the deep roots of the kinship matrix that can be traced back generations. Yet none of Maria's living kin supported her engaging with ancestral spirits, and none of them maintained in a relationship with this or any other ancestor themselves. In this sense. Maria departed from others in her family in choosing to maintain ties with ancestors. As she grew closer to her kulu, she drifted further from her natal kin.

In the next section of the talk, I turned to Kutanda to explore the qualities of queer people's relations with ancestral spirits and suggest that they serve to reorient the forms of healing that ancestors offer.

Kutanda

As Maria's account illustrated, parents often take their children to consult with Sangomas in search of forms of healing for their queerness. Following the story of Kutanda, I suggest that young queer people do find forms of healing through relationships with ancestral spirits, but of a very different kind to that envisaged by their parents. Kutanda is a non binary interlocutor who uses the pronouns they/them, who I first met four years ago. I just want to know that they then pronounce actually best reflect how third person pronouns work in their Nbele, which doesn't mark gender. “Sometimes the environment in Zen just feels hell bent on breaking,” Kutenda told me. “My life has been a lot.” As one of eight children, Kutanda lost both parents to HIV before reaching adulthood. When they came out as queer and non binary in their mid 20s, their relationships with their siblings fractured and have been distant ever since. But around this time, Kutanda 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. Kutanda finally felt they were on a trajectory to building a new life. Shortly after turning 30, however, Kutanda learned they had been denied a permanent residence permit by the South African government. As a result, they were forced to return to Zimbabwe with no relatives to look to for support in a country they haven't lived in for almost a decade. For this reason, Kutanda decided that a city where she had no connections, but hoped might offer a fresh start.

“At that time, I felt so vulnerable, so exposed. I was in a total emotional rut.” Kutanda told me. They felt let down by living kin, but also betrayed by the Christian god, they've been raised with. “I felt like Job,” Kutanda said, referring to the biblical figure whose faith in God was tested through the destruction of the things he cared about most. Kutanda went on, “Like how much suffering can one person take?” They were especially dismayed by the reaction of other Christians to their plight. “Some Christians told me that my suffering was punishment for being gay,” Kutanda said. “I began to question things, especially Christianity. I didn't want to be like Job, who just endures suffering. Looking back, I'd say that was the time that I broke up with God,” Kutanda concluded. From that time on they began to describe themselves as an atheist. Kutanda’s expression of a complete loss of faith and identification as an atheist is rare in Zimbabwe. They were the only person among hundreds of members of the sexual rights organisations I conducted fieldwork with, who used the term to describe themselves. But while Kutanda’s atheism appeared to signal a clear cut rejection of religious practise they nonetheless began to develop an interest in ancestral spirituality.

“Around that time, I began forming a connection to my ancestors,” Kutanda recalled. Having lived in South Africa, they were inspired by the greater openness transsexual traditions there than in Zimbabwe. Through conversations with friends and online research Kutanda gradually constructed a new perspective on Anakhosi. One small but significant step for Kutanda was beginning to keep track of their dreams, a practise encouraged by several sangomas they followed on social media because streams are an important medium through which ancestors communicate with the living. “They're like pieces of a puzzle,” Kutanda told me, “Speaking of dreams, when you put them together, you begin to see your story. Your ancestors are telling it to you, who you're meant to be through your dreams.” In the privacy of their small flat in Bulawayo, they nurtured a relationship with their ancestors through simple and somewhat improvised rituals, lighting candles, meditating, singing songs.

Through these practises, Kutanda told me, they began to feel the presence of their ancestors. Kutanda spoke powerfully about how the experience of building relationships with their ancestors had affected them. “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,” Kutanda said. They explained that unlike with living relatives for whom the discovery of queerness often created distance, they felt accepted and protected by Anakhosi. “I’ve yet to find a queer person who says my ancestors revealed to me that they're against my sexual orientation,” Kutanda said, echoing Maria's experiences. “It emboldens me. Like my ancestors love me the way I am. If somebody is going to have a problem with me, my ancestors will deal with them. It gives me so much courage.”

The image on this slide depicts AGogo or grandmother spirit caring for a child, underlining their caring and protective qualities. As Kutanda developed a relationship with their spirits, they discovered forms of intimacy, affection, and understanding they often felt denied by living kin. As we've seen, being chosen by ancestral spirits singles out the host as being equipped with unique qualities to serve as a vessel for spirits. In this sense, queerness is transformed from something to be changed into an invaluable aspect of someone's being, Maria echoed Kutanda’s sentiment. Noting the preponderance of queer people with ancestral callings in Bulawayo, Maria has pondered why ancestral spirits are so often drawn to queer people as their hosts. Most Anakhosi were alienated in some ways during their lives, they were special, but they were outsiders. More than this, Maria felt that there are commonalities between the subject positions. Of queer people and Anakhosi. As she explained. “Nowadays, families are not doing the ceremonies they should to connect to their ancestors. Amakhosi feel neglected. I think they feel a kindredness with us. They understand our isolation and exclusion. I think they seek people who understand loneliness as much as they do.”

In Maria's account, queerness has proved to be intrinsic to the spirits’ choice of host, offering a vantage point on the world that spirits value and embrace. In choosing young queer people to be their hosts, ancestral spirits offer force of healing. This slide shows another image by Helen Zabidi entitled ‘The modern mother’. There's a lot that could be said about the picture, including the androgyny of its main character. I use it here to depict the qualities of kinship that Amakhosi offer, particularly the sense of being held and supported when an ancestral spirit chooses a queer person from among their many descendants to operate as their host they challenge the stories will be told about them by family members, pastors, older sangomas, even politicians. Notions that queerness is un-African, that gender expression or sexual desires ought to be changed, or that their subject position inhibits forming strong kind relations. For Maria and Kutanda, fostering relationships with ancestral spirits offered a particular kind of healing. While Maria still argued that a sangoma's primary role is providing healing for others, she foregrounded herself as the subject of healing in her relationship with spirits. “Being a healer is a journey towards healing yourself,” she told me. “For the first time, it's making me feel worse. They see all. These things about you that you don't know about yourself and they don't ignore the parts that are damaged, they heal them.” For Kutanda, some of these forms of healing were very concrete. Kutanda had experienced several acts of sexual violence from men in the past and described feeling fear and animosity towards men they didn't know. When they walked past groups of men in their neighbourhood, they were often filled with terror. They compensated for this by immersing themselves in queer and feminist activism and surrounding themselves with women and queer people. But as the tender explained, one of their ancestral spirits, the Kulu or grandfather spirit, helped facilitate a reconciliation with masculinity. And, in their words, enabled a form of healing from the violence they've experienced. “With all the things I've been through, I don't think I would have found any kind of reconciliation without my grandfather spirit,” they told me. “I think my crew allowed me to trust men again. Or at least to not be afraid of men.” Overtime, both Kutanda and Maria built strong and meaningful relationships. With our ancestral spirits. Whereas Maria's mother imagined that ancestral healing would result in altering her gender expression, Maria found healing of a totally different kind, a sense of acceptance, protection, and understanding that came from her relationships with spirits.

These forms of healing serve to deepen relationships with spirits, cultivating the felt qualities of kinship that many of my interlocutors rarely experience in their relations with natal kin.

In the final section of my talk, I'm going to discuss the experience of Izaki, which reveals how engagements with ancestral spirituality may also reconfigure relationships with more immediate kin.

Izaki: Reconfiguring kinship

Izaki is a trans man in his late 30s who I've known for the past six years. In a recent conversation sitting outside a bar in Bulawayo, as he took long drags on his cigarette. He told me about a strange experience he’d been having. “When I go to visit my mother's grave site these days I can't find it,” he told me. “I've been six or seven times in the past year and I just can't find it.” He went on. “Each time I ask the people who work at the cemetery. They should know where it is. I know the grade number but they can't find it either. We walk around together and in the end they stand there looking confused.” When Izaki actually began to tell me the story about trying to find his mother's grave, I was surprised by the sudden desire to visit it. Every time we've spoken about his childhood on previous occasions, Izaki had underlined how fraught his relationship with his mother had been. Izaki was born when his mother had just turned 18. His father never acknowledged his upkeep, which meant that he grew up with no knowledge of his father's side of the family. For his mother, this meant Izaki came to represent a dramatic curtailment to her freedom and the end of her aspirations for the future. She was from a poor family and to her his birth represented being stuck in the same place for the rest of her life. Two years later, she fell pregnant again, and by the age of 20 had two children whose fathers refused to acknowledge.

Izaki's earliest memories were from when his mother was in her early 20s and began to drink as she grappled with the emotions stemming from her situation. In these memories, his mother was almost always away from the house. Only there late in the evening and early in the morning. And he and his younger brother were largely raised by their grandmother. When Izaki spoke about this time, the pain was always evident in his voice. “I always knew I was the worst thing in her life,” Izaki told me. “She used to curse me. She would say you were a mistake. She hit me. She threw stones. I wish I had a single good memory of her, but the truth is I don't.” After a difficult childhood and early adolescence, Izaki's mother died when he was 15. At that time, she was 33 and pregnant for the third time, weeks from giving birth. She became suddenly ill in what would later be recorded as one of the first cases of meningitis in Bulawayo Izaki remembered. The cause of the illness was discovered too late to save her or the baby she was carrying. At the age of 15, this meant that Izaki and his younger brother were effectively orphaned. With these conversations about his mother in mind, I was initially surprised when Izaki mentioned his persistent attempts to find his mother's grave. As he told me, “I've been going to the cemetery trying to find her grave at least once a month for the past six months, but I can't find it.”

As we continued to talk, it became clear that ancestral spirits were part of the story of his search of his mother's grave. I've known Izaki had experienced ancestors visiting him in his dreams for years. When we first met, he recalled a distant grandfather who appeared as a snake, coming to tell him to accept a gift that he wanted to give him. “He was always confusing to me,” Izaki explained at the time. His grandmother had told him that his grandfather wanted to pass on a gift to him because he was intended to be a healer. In earlier conversations, Izaki had been deeply ambivalent about this, he told me. “I don't want it. I told my grandmother I'm already in the healing industry. I've been a nurse for almost 20 years. Why should I change?” Part of his aversion to ancestral spirituality was that he found it both intimidating and backward looking, and had no desire to pursue it for himself.

Indeed, among the people I knew in a world of queer activism in Bulawayo, Izaki has always been one of the most hostile to the notion of engaging with ancestors. As we continued to speak in the bar that day, however, I began to gather that his search for his mother's grave indicated a shifting attitude towards ancestral spirituality. In the first place, the dreams about his grandfather had become more and more frequent, as had other dreams that fleshed out his understanding of their meaning. Every night he dreamt of himself in traditional attire, dressed in the clothes and beads of a sangoma, performing what he understood to be traditional ceremonies in a river that he didn't yet know what they were for. “I saw myself on one of those mats amatsazi, Izaki said describing a traditional woven rug mat seen in this image on the left. “I saw myself kneeling there with one of those things on my. Head and those beads around my wrists.” Izaki said. “Referring to the types of ceremonial attire that sangomas wear. I was even throwing Amar Tambol. The bones,” he said with amazement, referring to the wooden blocks that are the size of dominoes used as divining instruments by sangomas, which are shown in the image on the right. In light of this, I reminded him of the time he told me he didn't want to accept the gift from his grandmother. “Mm-hmm,” he responded. “I remember that too. But now I have to take the gift,” he said, laughing. “Now it's not just my grandfather coming, but my mum too.” As Izaki told me about his visits from his mother in his dreams, I gathered that their relationship was beginning to shift. Amakhosi are never the spirits of those who've died recently, but the spirits of more distant ancestors. Only those who have faded from living memory, those who are not known to anyone alive today, have attained the status and power as spirits that they might bestow guests on the living, and therefore be known as an Amakhosi. But those who died more recently, like Izaki's mother are still part of the realm of spirits where Amakhosi dwell and play an important role in mediating relationships between the living and more distant ancestors like Amakhosi. They function as a bridge between the mysterious and distant world and literacy and the complex, immediate world of the living. Izaki refers to his mother by the term ilanda, which literally means ‘someone in waiting’, in this case waiting to attain the status of Amakhosi. In Izaki's case, his mother had begun to play a vital role in mediating his relationship with one particular ethnicity or singular ancestral spirit. “These days I'm talking to her quite a lot, actually. In my dreams,” he explained. “Recently, she was telling me I need to pray and told me that whenever I pray, I need to have 7 candles with me. And my cloth.” Each ilanda has complex and idiosyncratic meanings, and in this case Izaki’s mother was helping him understand what his kulu or grandfather spirit wanted. He went on. “She told me that I need to go to the water. But I told her I'm afraid because I worry I might not come back.” As though he. Said, referring to ceremonies that take place in rivers that have fraught with danger, he continued. “But she told me you don't need to be afraid. We'll be there for you.”

As Izaki’s mother had begun to occupy this distinctive role as a bridge between him and a long, distant grandfather working to mediate between the world of the living and that of Amakhosi, their relationship had begun to change. “I would say it's easier now because I can talk to her and say I'm struggling. I could never do that when she was alive. Her problems were always bigger than ours. Now I say to her, you failed to look after me when you were alive. But now you're here and she says I'm here by your side. Don't be afraid.” In this way, Izaki's relationship with his kulu or grandfather spirit who chose him to be his host, not only affirmed his value in the eyes of the spirit, but was instrumental in repairing and reworking his relationship with his mother, who had died 20 years earlier.

“It’s healing,” He told me. “One day she'll be Amakhosi to my kids, but for now she's just there to protect me.” Izaki’s kulu’s choice of him as his host underline that his mother had failed to recognise his value when she'd been alive and enabled her to make amends in the present. It also meant that their relationship continued to evolve even now 2 decades after she died.

On this slide is a final painting by Helen Zabidi. It's titled ‘To Be Born Again’, a clear play on Christian idioms of second birth. But here I use it to illustrate the ways that Amakhosi continue to live in the world and intervene in relations among the living, as well as between the living and the dead, often creating friction but also offering repair. Like Maria and Kutanda, Izaki echoed how meaningful it is for queer people to know that they've been singled out by distant ancestors to act as their medium, but he also described a shifting relationship with his mother, with whom he'd never been close while she was alive. In this sense, Izaki's ancestral calling was facilitating the mending of a relationship that had been broken. His story underlines how relationships with Amakhosi can work to reconfigure other relationships. As we prepared to leave the bar that day, Izaki explained to me the reason he'd been struggling to find his mother's graveside. It was because she was striving to get his attention. A clear play on Christian idioms of second birth. But here I use it to illustrate the ways that Amakhosi continue to live in the world and intervene in relations among the living, as well as between the living and the dead, often creating friction but also offering repair. Like Maria and Kutanda, Izaki echoed how meaningful it is for queer people to know that they've been singled out by distant ancestors to act as their medium. But he also described A shifting relationship with his mother, with whom he'd never been close while she was alive. In this sense, Izaki’s ancestral calling was facilitating the mending of a relationship. That had been broken. His story underlines how relationships with analysis can work to reconfigure other relationships. As we prepared to leave the bar that day, Izaki explained to me the reason he'd been struggling to find his mother's grave site. It was because she. Was striving to get his attention and warning him that he had to accept his grandfather's calling. If he followed his grandfather's wishes and continued to pursue the calling, his mother stressed, he would be able to find it again.

Thanks for listening to the Oxford Anthropology Podcast. For more episodes, visit podcasts.ox.ac.uk/ anthropology, or find us on Apple Podcast audio.