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Sex, gender and *Uvalo/Letswalo* centred spirituality: in conversation with Gogo Mapitsi Mohoto

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ABSTRACT

In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) Amadiume argues that the female orientation of Nnobi society and its emphasis on female industriousness is 'derived from goddess Idemili – the ancestral religious deity' (27). While Christianity dominates the outlook and conservatism of the post-colonial African state, we are seeing a growing public presence of African spiritual practitioners in southern Africa. The interview with Lieketso Gogo Mapitsi Mohoto reflects on her journey of becoming a healer. She uses the concept of '*uvalo*' to argue for deeper connected spiritual awareness within this practice of healing. Using the Nguni concept of *uvalo*, she refers to the fluid meaning of intuition also known as *Umbilini* among Xhosa-speaking people, while Sesotho speakers call it *Letswalo*. This intimate connection with the Divine can sometimes mean a sense of fear for ordinary people, while it promotes a deep sense of knowing for the spiritually conscious. Gogo Mapitsi's connections between spirituality and land, speak to Amadiume's matrifocal understanding of productivity as linked to the goddess *Idemili* in Nnobi histories. Gogo Mapitsi reminds us that the multiple health, economic, psychological crises we face today are linked 'to how *uvalo* works.' She tells us that the 'cultivation of that inner knowing and the cultivation of trust in that knowing' is central to how a Sangoma understands and responds to the needs of their society.

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Introduction

In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) Amadiume argues that the female orientation of Nnobi society and its emphasis on female industriousness is 'derived from goddess Idemili – the ancestral religious deity' (27). In the Nnobi myths of origin, Idemili was the wife of the first man in Nnobi, Aho-bi-na-ago, 'the influence of Idemili, a woman, was stronger than that of her husband Aho, and so she spread her idols everywhere' (29). Amadiume (1987, 104) argues that the 'supremacy of Idemili, whether in her elaborate rituals of worship, her acknowledged or her all-embracing administrative laws, and

Nnobi women's identification with her, cannot be denied or underestimated'. The highest marker of a woman's industriousness and success among the Nnobi was the *Ekwe* title. As Amadiume (1987, 42) points out,

taking the title might mark the climax of economic success, but the Nnobi people would generally claim that it was the goddess herself, through her possession of the woman, who would give her the money or wealth with which to take the title.

The introduction of male Christianity did not only lead to the condemnation of 'all activities centred on the goddess' (121), it 'also banned the associated *Ekwe* title. In a short space of time, the focal symbols of women's self-esteem were shattered' (123). The importance of rituals in daily life in Nnobi is emphasised throughout the text. The ability to attain wealth and the gifts of industriousness are linked to the divine.

As with the Nnobi, colonialism attacked southern African religions and an ancestor-focused spirituality. As Tisani (1987, 91) argues, 'as far as Africans are concerned ancestors are a reality ... they symbolise a continuity that the past, the present and future share in'. He argues that amaXhosa, like many African communities, 'subscribed to a cosmological worldview that recognised izinyanya (ancestors) as the rightful owners of the land' (44). In this worldview then, it makes sense that one's material success and misfortune is linked to their relationship with their ancestors. Tisani (1987) argues that 'access into the presence of izinyanya [ancestors] is not available to all, but only to a few chosen and anointed ones. The iinyanga [diviners] are such chosen and anointed people' (71). Tisani (1987) argues that 'it is in situations of need and suffering that have called for inyanga to come to the fore' (72).

While Christianity dominates the outlook and conservatism of the post-colonial African state, we are seeing a growing public presence of African spiritual practitioners in southern Africa. Maliehe (2020), a healer in Lesotho who started practising in 1978, writes about how social media platforms have provided a space for young healers to share their 'experiences and practices'. There are phenomena such as 'Instagram and Twitter Gogos' and mainstream shows such as '*Izangoma Zodumo*' [Acclaimed Healers] that provide a rare public picture of the lives and practices of young Sangomas, which were usually known by other *Zangoma* and the people in their community. It seems to us that the *inyanga* (diviner, Tisani 1987, 21) and *sangoma* ('a spirit medium/diviner/healer', Van Binsbergen 2003, 1) have come to the fore among the educated, Christian raised Africans who, as nineteenth century Africans, were taught to mistrust African religion and spirituality.

The interview below with Lieketso Gogo Mapitsi Mohoto reflects her journey of becoming a healer. She uses the concept of '*uvalo*' as the point of departure to argue for deeper connected spiritual awareness within this practice of healing. Using the Nguni concept of *uvalo*, refers to the fluid meaning of intuition also known as *umbilini* among Xhosa speaking people, while Sesotho speakers call it *letswalo*. The connection between the healer and her Primary ancestor could be loosely termed as *letswalo*. This intimate connection with the Divine can sometimes mean a sense of fear for ordinary people, while it promotes a deep sense of knowing for the spiritually conscious. This inner voice forms part of the ontologies ingrained among *amaThwasa*.

During the South African local government elections in 2016, former South African president Jacob Zuma proclaimed in a rally that 'the ancestors are turning their backs against

you if you leave the ANC [African National Congress] and you will have bad luck' (ENCA News Report 2016). This is while the ANC's 'war song' (ENCA News Report 2016) during those elections was called '*Asinavalo*' – the direct translation is 'we do not have *uvalo*'. For many, the evoking of ancestral power to punish those who do not vote for the ruling party, while proclaiming to having no fear/*umbilini*, seemed to be at odds with how *uvalo/letswalo* works in the African world sense.

Gogo Mapitsi makes an important distinction about how spirituality, and the discipline of practice it demands, may not produce immediate feelings of happiness, but provides the possibilities for deeper contentment of self and community. She speaks of the connections between spirituality and land, and importantly argues that the multiple health, economic, psychological crises we face today are linked 'to how *uvalo* works'. Tisani (1987) argues that it is 'need and suffering' that gives rise to a healer in the community, Gogo Mapitsi tells us that the 'cultivation of that inner knowing and the cultivation of trust in that knowing' is central to how a *Sangoma* understands and responds to the needs of their society.

Sex and gender

Editors: Where were you born and in what year?

Gogo Mapitsi: I was born in Phuthaditjhaba in the Eastern Free State in 1986.

Editors: Can you tell us about how you were raised and if/when you started to notice family/community speak about gender?

Gogo Mapitsi: Well [chuckle] you know in my nuclear family ... sex as a kind of male, female thing is not taken particularly seriously. My parents made us all wash dishes and we all learned to cook, we all learned to wash clothes and wash our own underwear, all that stuff. So, the only big difference is that my father had a very particular idea about boys and men, and what they do. So, his interest in cars, changing oil and things like that is something I will never understand. I don't think that is function of sex. He did teach my sister how to change the oil in the car. So, I don't think he takes it particularly seriously himself. I don't really remember my being a girl being a particularly important thing. I don't *feel* specifically female or specifically male or anything like that. I have quite an ambivalent relationship with the male female dichotomy.

I kind of ended up where I ended up because I followed my interests rather than because of how gender is constructed in my family. So, my sibling relationships, I've got two brothers and a sister and that we are just four people who happen to come from the same family. I don't think I have ever even had to ask or consider whether my siblings are gay or straight or anything like that.

Editors: What are your earlier memories of how you came to learn about the differences between gender and sexuality?

Gogo Mapitsi: I don't know if I ever thought about the difference between gender and sexuality, until I lost my best friend in high school to suicide. And I had a sense that my relationship with her was not a typical friendship relationship and that there was some

other depth to it that was perhaps not entirely appropriate for a friendship relationship. I don't think she even considered it inappropriate either. But it was when she died that I realised that it was possible to have strong feelings for a person of the same sex, that are not necessarily only friendship and by that I don't mean to degrade friendship.

Editors: What are the ruptures, let's say from how your parents' generation thought about these ideas and the continuities that you see with your generation?

Gogo Mapitsi: I only knew my maternal grandmother so that's the only grandparent I had in my life. I know that my father's father knew me, and I have very faded memories of him because I was very young when he died. But my grandmother was also quite feminist in her thinking about the world. She was very clear about leadership as a gender-neutral position, that a leader is not necessarily a man or woman but a person with integrity and the ability to influence people. So, I guess my *very* grey-area thinking about gender and sex is mixed by the fact that I was never aware that there was any strictness about how men must act or what men must do and what women must do or how women must act. Of course, having been raised by a cisgendered heterosexual couple that is the model that I had growing up over marriage relationships for instance and my parents are quite average in that way, they are like an average heterosexual couple you know. I think my family is more interested in what one is interested in and good at, rather than what one is supposed to be doing.

Of course, as a drama person, as a practitioner and as a film maker I live in this subliminal – in between space you know, and as a *Sangoma* I live in this subliminal space. I hang out all the time with people who call me '*Baba*' because I am their *Gobela*, I guess I hadn't really thought about it all that carefully because my own *Gobela* is a woman but her dominant spiritual guide is male. So, I don't know that I think that there is any big like 'whoohaa' to be made about maleness and femaleness particularly in the spirit world.

Knowing and not knowing: UVALO centred spirituality

Editors: Borrowing from Krista Tippet of the *OnBeing* podcast project, 'what is your religious or spiritual background'?

Gogo Mapitsi: I haven't really been able to think about that for a long time. I was raised mostly as a Catholic because I went to a Catholic school. So, my religious upbringing has been that of a Catholic and even then, white Catholicism as opposed to a Manyano kind of Catholicism. I think even though my mother grew up in the Black people's NG Kerk, she took on the Catholicism as a way to just see what it is that is actually happening there, so that she doesn't miss anything about our spiritual upbringing at school, which was quite a big part. I mean church was a big part of school because the school was Catholic: we would go to church every Wednesday; went to Mass every Wednesday. And so, she decided that we might as well consolidate that, and we would go to Mass on Sundays as well. So, I had my first holy communion in the Catholic church, and I am a confirmed member of the Catholic church if anyone can believe that. I mean I don't subscribe to many of their ideas. I just really kind of enjoy the very clear structure of the

Catholic church. Like you could walk into any Catholic church without any understanding of what the language that is being used in the church is, and still be able to get through Mass because it's the same Mass everywhere, and I think I kind of enjoy that.

Editors: How was 'African spirituality' spoken about when you were growing up?

Gogo Mapitsi: My African spirituality kind of notions are mixed because my father was raised in an Apostolic church environment, you know the kind of church which is where *bayapeyida* (enema), *bayaphalaza* (voluntarily induced vomiting), that kind of situation where you must now *phalaza* (voluntarily vomit) every weekend. But he was not very strict about us doing all those things and did not really insist on us going to church. My father is an agnostic as far as I can tell and one of the really powerful spiritual lessons I learnt from him was, I think I was about 12 or 13 when he made me read the *Conversations with God*; 1, 2 and 3 books by Neale Donald Walsch and that for me has been the basis of my spiritual upbringing. My parents were not traditionalists in the spiritual sense.

So, I'm a supposedly agnostic Catholic but in my own thinking. I am very clearly a believer in a higher power or God force that I sometimes refer to as Spirit. And that has been the cornerstone of my beliefs. I've been quite mixed in that way and I quite enjoy that because it allowed me to be able to be in a position to believe when I was told that I needed to go and *thwasa* (processes and procedures for preparation and training to be a practitioner, guide and a medium) because I got it. I understood that no one is asking me to worship ancestors which is the point that 'African traditional religion' is not a replacement of God. It is like the ancestors are the middle management on the way to God, the ones who speak to God on your behalf. And that's where I stand even now, for me, the ancestors stand in the same place as Mary mother of God and I think Jesus is also in that grouping of spirit guides who can speak on your behalf to a higher power. So that's my take on what my spiritual background is. My opportunity to *thwasa* has granted me an opportunity to make more concrete that belief, that my spiritual life is something which is in process constantly but is also constantly evolving and moving with me as I am guided through life.

Editors: How did you come to know that you would become a healer?

Gogo Mapitsi: How did I know that I would become a healer? I did not [giggle]. I just didn't. It was when I broke both my ankles at the same time that I thought 'this is, I don't know what this is', and for some reason I believed it was a spiritual sign more than just a fall. I remember very clearly feeling as if I had been pushed down between my living room and my bedroom. It was just like there was a whisper, literally someone whispered in my ear. And then the nurse who did my intake for X-rays said 'Yho! What would you say if I told you that both your legs are broken?' This was before they did the X-ray and my response to her, without thinking and without any knowledge of what I really meant to say, I said to her, 'I would say that it's an ancestry thing, there is no other way that I can think of this. I can't consider it a coincidence', and she laughed at me.

But of course, that's precisely what was happening; there are some aspects of life that we know about even before we know what we know, and I think that 'knowing before knowing' is the thing that makes spirit so interesting and just powerful because it means that supposedly Catholic person with no real knowledge of traditional belief systems or the ways that spirit works in the African framework can come to that conclusion by *fluke*, by just an accident of knowing and not knowing. So, I consider that a function of '*uvalo*'. I think that thing I call '*uvalo*', that powerful feeling of knowing and not knowing at the same time, it's like a not knowing without confusion, that I have found to be a powerful guiding light for me as I journeyed between my Catholic self and my *Sangoma* self. And even in my *Sangoma* life, I am *umprofita* (apostolic prayer worker, who practises through water, light and prayer) on some level, so *ngithwase ubungoma ngathwasa ubuprofita* (I am a *Sangoma* and an apostolic prayer worker). So there is a very clear line between religion and spirit for me, in fact it just *distinguishes* them which for me makes perfect sense of the father, the son and the holy spirit as a grouping but also makes it perfectly sensible that I can be a *Sangoma* and also be Christian on some level.

Editors: How did your family respond to your calling?

Gogo Mapitsi: My family is still trying to deal with the fact of my process, I think mostly because of how it happened. I started to have these dreams where I was just being slapped. My spirit guide is not particularly patient and she would just come flying out of my dreams and slap me awake and eventually one day she just slapped me and she gave me an ultimatum: to live and work or to die. No negotiating. And I woke up that day and I literally packed my bags and I went to go and *thwasa*. At the time, I had not spoken to my father for some years so my poor mother had to deal with that whole situation by herself and I don't think she was equipped either and I think she is still quite upset about how that happened. I don't think it could have happened any differently. But she also has been the more accepting of my parents, of the situation that I now find myself in and there is a point at which your spirit life has to grow and sometimes that upsets people and that has been my experience. As they say, 'the prophet is not loved in her own home' and that is to say that no one who knows you from your childhood believes you are a prophet.

Editors: How would you describe the *Sangoma's* epistemology. How does the *Sangoma* come to know?

Gogo Mapitsi: You know, I think there is an internal system. That thing that tells us that we should feel guilty about the things we did wrong. The thing that tells us when we are out of line, when we are going in the right direction; that thing, whatever it is called, is the thing which is trained by the situation of *ukuthwasa*. It's a kind of humility but it is also a kind of strength. It's a knowing and not knowing. I don't know how to describe it, but it's a thing that I think is called '*uvalo*'. So, the question of how does a *Sangoma* come to know is a difficult one because one knows because one understands that the other things are not the thing. I suppose, it is like it's not this, it's not this, yes, it's this. But who gives us the criteria, where are the silos, so what are the options? I do not know yet, but I know that

one of the most important aspects of teaching or initiating a person is the cultivation of that inner knowing and the cultivation of trust in that knowing.

Editors: You have spoken about *uvalo* in an African world sense, in a country that is in an economic crisis and now health crisis, how can *uvalo* help us to make sense of where the country is and where individuals are in how they think about self and community?

Gogo Mapitsi: Firstly, what is *uvalo* and how does it work? But also, how are *uvalo* and *ubuntu* related? How is the conversation about community and personhood going be heard in a society where we can commodify mental health, where we can commodify spirit and sell it? It's been done with yoga, it's been done with like commercial Buddhism that is like now everyone has got a Tibetan singing bowl in their house and they are feeling like they are doing some of the most 'spiritual' work than they've ever done in their lives. And for me, there is a kind of displacement happening between how people think of health as their own personal thing and how people understand health to be a larger community thing.

So, if I live in an *ubuntu* society then I must acknowledge that my sickness is your sickness and that my health therefore is your health. This selfcare is community care. So, these public conversations about selfcare and mental health and how we going to do those things living in a capitalist society need to be had because you can commodify spirit if you like, but you can't sell it to someone. There is no magic pill that makes spirit transferable. There is no way to give someone else your own spiritual lessons and there is no way to sell someone lessons that their spirit should be reintegrating. So, for me these crises, these economic and health draughts we are all in, this kind of communal, psychological tragedy we are all playing out – is fundamentally linked to how *uvalo* works. I suspect that the ability to use *uvalo* as a thing which drives one from the inside, as not just a function but a form. It is a process which can be entered into but cannot be divorced from. You can't live without some kind of relationship with spirit, even if that relationship is that you don't want to have a relationship.

Editors: What is the value of connecting to the ancestral/our ancestral legacies?

Gogo Mapitsi: I think there is great value in doing that. There is great value in knowing from where one comes and from whom one comes and what the practices of those beings, what those practices meant or mean and how they now come to influence who we are now or who we become tomorrow. This is why people study history but it's like spirit history; what do I believe and how does that belief construct me and how do I construct that belief, how do I think about it, how do I make sense of it?

There are many ways to approach a connection with spirit and the legacies that we have been left with and those are as wide as religions are many. I think there is great value in selecting a grouping of activities and systems of beliefs that work for you, that are sustainable and that are life giving to one's own personal spirit, things that feel good, things that bring happiness, things that bring lightness and excitement and laughter. These are things that spirit enjoys and the part of the thing is that it's difficult to define

those things and to group them because they are so varied. It's like as many people as they are in the world there are that many combinations of things that could be aspects of spiritual legacy that we could all be using to work through our spiritual pain and our historical pain. For instance when I *phahla* [ritual practice/prayer performed to connect with ancestors], I use a Tibetan singing bowl which theoretically is not linked in any specific way to this spiritual traditions that I have grown up in or that I'm practising; but that speaks to a deep happiness or a deep contentment that I experienced from things like Tibetan bowls and meditation balls. So, I think it's important to look for the things which feel good. But before we can look for things that feel good or that we know are good, we must be sure that we are capable of determining the things which feel good that are in fact good, differentiate them from things which feel good which are clouding or dampening down that which in fact is good. I mean taking drugs feels good initially but does not necessarily produce good spiritual results. So, this thing of how to connect to one's ancestral memories or legacies is linked to that thing, that fine line, the thing which feels good, which does good is not necessarily the thing which feels good which is good, sometimes the thing which is good doesn't feel good at first and so until it does, until it is good.

Some of these things are a matter of building habit. I don't enjoy waking up every night or 3am to *phahla* and pray but I know it feels good and I know it is good because when I do it, I feel lighter and brighter and more capable of being among other people and being able to be compassionate and open to others. It's a deep contentment that comes with having found a specific thing that opens up one's spirit, opens up that third eye and allows one to produce something beautiful and something which produces contentment rather than a desperate scramble to just feel something. Which I think has been the case in the time that I have been consulting with patients, people who want a quick fix; tell me what must I do, you want to slaughter a chicken, you want to do this, we'll do this but truly does this produce contentment? This is a tough question.

Editors: Do you see a connection between the ancestral and the land?

Gogo Mapitsi: Absolutely. Firstly, one cannot have ancestral work without having land from which ancestral work can flourish. All preparations and the nourishment needed to absorb them is derived from nature. Some medicines are for conditions that have long since been forgotten about and some which are yet to come which is why I am a little excited about this whole thing of how are we helping to find alleviations for Covid-19 and of course we are fearing *umhlonyane* (Lengana) as if *umhlonyane* (Artimisia Afra/African wormwood/Lengana) has only been discovered right now.

So, there are certain things that are available to us from the land that have very particular functions that only a person who is guided by spirit would find in the first place so *kufuneka uvalo ukuthi uyithole le nto uyifunayo* [you need *uvalo* to find what you are looking for], when you get *ehlathini* [to the forest] there's certain plants, certain trees that you see with your spiritual eye and there are some things which say to you 'that thing will cure this kind of thing'. That means we should have the ability to have access to all kinds of land, so that we can have access to all kinds of plants so that we can have the ability to heal all kind of illness.

For instance, my father's maternal family has been known for treating epilepsy (see Jäger et al. 2005) and they had a very specific thing that they did. Ja, there is a need for land and the things which grow on it to be available to people whose *letswalo* has been trained to guide them to find certain things for specific purposes that are not necessarily transferrable to the entire population.

So, my understanding of ancestral work and its relationship to land is that they are not extractable from each other, they are fundamentally linked to each other.

Editors: Would you agree that *ubungoma* is having a rare public moment in South Africa? What has led to this moment?

Gogo Mapitsi: I do. I think there is massive spiritual shift that is happening, spirit is coming more into vogue than you think and there is nothing new about it. And I don't think that there are necessarily more young *Sangomas* now than there were before, but that there is more opportunity for them to speak across countries and provinces and states of being and to guide, not only themselves but each other and to share the things they have learnt from their guides with people who have been guided in different ways. So, this moment is rare and yet it is so public. I think that it's because there has been so much secrecy around African spiritual practices, how African spirituality has been delegitimised and dragged through the mud of witchcraft. The unfortunate fate of the word '*umuthi*' is a good illustration. There is this colonial belief about African spirituality that we cannot seem to shake. But I don't think that this is only African spirituality in the traditional sense of *ubungoma*, I think this is a worldwide phenomenon. When we start to look at these new-age churches, who speak more about the devil than they do about God and avoiding the devil is somehow emphasised more than speaking to God. It's a fear-based illusion.

Conclusion

The interview with Gogo Mapitsi Mohoto speaks to the deep spiritual connections of knowing and *amaThwasa* as the guides of conscience in society through *uvalo*. The 'sudden' rise or awareness to the number of *izangoma* (healers) /*ubungoma* (call to divination) is indicative of a society in trouble (*inkathazo*). Her reflections on the rituals and practices of cleansing (*ukuphalaza*) which seeks to clean from inside with *ukuphahla* (ritual practice of prayer) is a form of connecting the healer to the ancestors. She helps us break the strict binaries of the African religion and other forms of religious beliefs as she acknowledges the complicated relations that African people tend to have in their spiritual life towards wholeness. As she notes, in the land of the dead (*kwabaphantsi*) and the living (among *amaThwasa*) there exists gender fluidity and language that makes them accessible as *ooGogo* (grandmother, even for males) and *aboBaba* (fathers, even for females). These titles are not restricted to the biological sex of the healer as this depends on the ancestral spirit guiding *iThwasa*.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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