

## Abstract

The present thesis “Not so ‘Traditional’ Healing: Constructions of Illness Reality and Spirit Possession in a Rapidly Changing Society in Venda, South Africa” aims to analyze socio-cultural and political aspects of ‘traditional’ healing which had been the focus of fieldwork of the author in ‘Venda’, South Africa (in the period between 2004-6). In the first section of the thesis the author has shown that the medical concepts and symbols marked as ‘traditional’ have not formed a closed, time-less system. On the contrary, they have reflected and shaped far-reaching socio-cultural changes in the post-apartheid dispensation characterised by the neo-liberal market reforms, congealing of socio-economic inequalities, transformations of gender identities and the politics of ‘tradition’ and identity. ‘Traditional healing’ has thus been constituted through a constant process of (re)invention of symbols and practices which have referred to the ‘Venda past’ while aiming to delineate boundaries of ‘tradition’ in relation to biomedicine. The second section of the thesis has focussed on the phenomenon of ancestor spirit possession which has also constituted the means through which ‘traditional’ healers have been recruited and their claims to knowledge and healing power have been legitimized. In contrast to the available literature, own fieldwork has pointed to a significant transformation of the cult. Rural women have ceased to hold dominant positions within the cult in contemporary ‘Venda’. Among the most numerous new recruits have been the social categories of men, and women – those who have been labour migrants to the urban centres of South Africa. Participation in the possession cult of these new social group has reflected wider transformations of contemporary society in South Africa and of gender relations, engendering changes in gender relations and the limitation of social power and authority of men.