Converting the Spirit Spouse: The Violent Transformation of the Female Body in Post-War Urban Mozambique

Linda van de Kamp, VU University Amsterdam / African Studies Centre Leiden

lvandekamp@asleiden.nl

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the forceful transformation of the female body in Brazilian Pentecostalism in Mozambique and argues for an understanding of conversion as an embodied spiritual warfare. Presenting the case of avenging spirits, such as the spirit spouse, it explores how spirits interfere in women’s new socio-economic positions and intimate relationships. Pentecostal pastors force women to stay in control of their body and a ‘violent’ war against the spirit unfolds. The prevalence of ‘violence’ implies that we should critically question a perception of conversion as bringing healing and harmony.

KEY WORDS Pentecostalism, Conversion, Gender, Violence, Mozambique

Introduction

In November 2006 at a service of the Brazilian Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Maputo, Mozambique’s capital city, I received the following invitation on a small piece of paper:

Attention !!!

Women
This Saturday at 17 hours, come to participate in the

**BIG WAR AGAINST MALEDICTIONS**

Such as: Sterility, destroyed marriage,

*not succeeding marrying, and visited by the husband of the night, abortion, impotent husband, cooling off in conjugal life, beating husband, childless,*

*Husband cheats on you, every man that turns up leaves you, your husband views you as his sister* [punctuation marks as in original, my translation from Portuguese, LvdK].

This list of maledictions is a good indication of the reasons why women of various ages start frequenting Pentecostal churches. Many women told me how a certain spirit obstructed their intimate relationships. At the same time, I noted that Pentecostal pastors were busy exorcizing a specific spirit, called husband of the night or spirit spouse,¹ who kept women from marrying and conceiving. The symptoms women related to such a spirit experience are: having sexual intercourse without the physical presence of a man, not succeeding to marry, the sudden disappearance of their partner or disputes with their partner although both love and long for each other. When they are married, the relationship is tense, the husband does not take interest in his wife but ‘views her as his sister’ and sexual intercourse is problematic.

Explanations about this spirit are numerous. The local healers (*curandeiros*) emphasized the historical roots of the spirit in different wars. To them the spirit spouse is a war spirit that seeks revenge and is calmed down by receiving a young woman as a gift. In the stories that circulate in Maputo, the spirit is mostly related to
witchcraft practices. Women would be given to spirits and in exchange the family get rich. The Pentecostals see the spirit as a demon. Fascinatingly, Brazilian Pentecostal pastors explain who the spirit is by referring to ‘devilish’ Afro-Brazilian spiritual entities from Brazil. Women who are designated to have a relation with a spirit spouse by Pentecostal pastors enter into a ‘spiritual war’ (guerra espiritual) – a ‘big war against maledictions’. Their body becomes the centre of a battle between the spirit spouse and the Holy Spirit.

The variety of accounts on the spirit spouse, the existing confusion about his character and origins, and his central position in the Pentecostal churches are intrinsically related to the social transformations that have been taking place in Mozambique. The spirit spouse acts and is acted upon in the post-war and neoliberal economic era impinging upon the growing number of single and financially independent women, female-headed households, gender roles and tense relations between kin and couples. The spirit shows that social transformations are embodied and spiritual. The changes in society are experienced in a spiritual way. Conversion to Pentecostalism interferes in these processes. Conversion is a process of transformation of the personal, social and spiritual dimensions of life. In the Pentecostal churches, the bodily encounter with ‘the burning power of the Holy Spirit’ forces women to be in control of their own body by declaring war on the spirits.

It struck me that converts and pastors continuously emphasized their involvement in a war and talked about the destructive character of spirits and kin. Moreover, women often reported on domestic violence and disputes with their partners. Yet, violence, in different dimensions, did not disappear during the conversion process. Instead, it seemed to increase. Therefore, I argue for an understanding of conversion as an embodied spiritual warfare. Conversion is
experienced as an ongoing process of fight against the impact of negative powers on women’s lifes and a challenge to create a new body able to move on in life. Converts actively engage in what Joel Robbins (2007) stressed to be a Christian culture that claims radical change and expects it to occur. However, by taking seriously converts’ statements and practices of cultural discontinuity, I argue that we should equally take into account the consequences of rupture in converts’ lives. I show that their conversion forcefully pushes converts to produce cultural change and to incorporate a pro-active behaviour. This attitude is risky and it is far away from an interpretation of Pentecostal churches that offer members help and peace in difficult situations.

This article is structured as follows. I will start with the impact of rapid social transformations and their spiritual dimensions. In the next section I introduce Brazilian Pentecostalism and the pastors’ approach to spirit spouses, followed by accounts of Pentecostal women who were related to a spirit spouse. I analyze how they embodied the spirit spouse and the Holy Spirit in the context of changing kin relations and changing perceptions of the female body in the urban space. I conclude with a discussion about the connection between conversion and violent transformation.

**Socio-spiritual transformations**

The spirit spouse is intrinsically linked to the social history of the Southern African region. Explaining the role of this spirit,\(^{ii}\) *curandeiros*\(^{iii}\) emphasized the importance of the relation between persons and ancestor spirits to assure the reproduction of life. This is for example very central in the *lobolo*, the customary marriage in Southern Mozambique. Through a gift, nowadays in the form of money, the families and ancestors of the bride and bridegroom become bounded which secures a future
generation. The exchange between the two families guarantees the continuation of those families and the social order (Bagnol 2006). Gifts are the oil that keeps social and spiritual relations going. In some circumstances, a woman herself can be offered as a gift in compensation for harm suffered in relationships. Following the same logic of the lobolo, she is a gift to establish or reconcile relationships. She can be given to an avenging spirit who belongs to a murdered or disadvantaged person. The spirit seeks revenge from the person who killed him by attacking the murderer’s family with illness and misfortune. To calm the spirit, compensation for his death and his reintegration in society is needed. This may happen through marriage with a girl of the murderer's family. The spirit becomes the girl’s spouse.

According to curandeiros, women not necessarily suffer from their spiritual husband as the Pentecostals argued. However, the fact that many women do, they said, is because the practices of lobolo are changing and the knowledge of the spiritual history is fading away. At the same time, the worries about a new wave of spirits seeking vengeance have increased in the post-war era. The destructive results of a long civil war (about 16 years: 1976-1992) were enormous and still are. Kinship structures have been affected because many families lost their kin. Many refugees live in new places and have lost contact with their places of origin. Especially women from the rural areas where the war was fought fled to the cities. Consequently, the number of female-headed households has increased (WLSAMOÇ 2001: 57-60, Oppenheimer and Raposo 2002: 20-21). Moreover, now that soldiers who underwent the cleansing rituals (Granjo 2007) will die in the coming years, the spirits that were temporarily calmed down are expected to become active again because they still seek revenge, curandeiros explained. All together, many people feel that the balance
between the social and the spiritual, which is important for the organization and reproductive force of society, has been disturbed.

Studies on how Mozambicans in the countryside deal with traumatic war experiences have pointed to the crucial role of spirit spouses, and spirits in general, in processes of reconciliation and restoration of society (Honwana 1996, Igreja 2007). During healing sessions, where spirit mediums speak to the avenging spirits, is reconstructed what exactly happened to resolve the afflictions. In this context spiritual husbands offer a way of dealing with war traumas. However, to many persons in the city of Maputo it is not obvious that social life is kept in equilibrium by the combined existence of humans and spirits, which, as will be shown in the following, is related to the particular urban history of spirits and social transformations.

One way in which one of my interlocutors, Julia, understood her single status at the age of 40 is the fact that the lobolo procedures were not carried out when her parents married. Her father belonged to the group of assimilados (civilized natives) in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) during the colonial period (Penvenne 1995: 9, 64-69). In order to get a recognized position in the colonial economy, the assimilados had to break with ‘uncivilized’ practices like lobolo. Julia herself was raised and educated during the socialistic Frelimo government that came into power after independence in 1975. As part of Frelimo’s modernizing project, ‘traditional’ practices had to be discontinued. Lobolo, polygamous relations, initiation rites and the like were forbidden. Frelimo promoted the ‘socialist family’ as the basic cell of society. This family was composed of a monogamous, nuclear family opposed to the polygamous and extended African family (Arnfred 2001: 41-2). Moreover, in contrast to the colonial policies, women were stimulated to work for a salary (Sheldon 2002: chapter 5). However, Julia and others recalled how tensions in the households slowly
increased. The failure of the socialist state farms and state industries caused a steep economic decline (Picher 2002: chapter 2). Resources became scarce. Moreover, there were feelings of uncertainty about gender roles, marriage and family life, resulting in a constant struggle about proper behavior and responsibilities (cf. Sheldon 1996: 8, 9). Tensions arose about women’s waged work as they were also expected to carry out the domestic work labor. According to various older women, the problem was and still is that old things were abandoned, but nothing came to replace it. For example, initiation rites were prohibited, but no new forms of sexual and marital education were implemented (cf. Lundin 2007: 143-4).

These older women and others like them believed that the rupture with ‘traditional’ culture and with ancestor spirits were the reason for the lack of well-being and success (cf. Honwana 2003: 63-4). In Maputo, many did as if they had broken with ‘traditional practices’ to avoid punishment, but continued to take part in different rituals (Lundin 2007: chapter 8). They learned to live with two realities that were called ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’. In the whole country people increasingly faced difficulties identifying positively with a socialistic, modern Mozambican state. The resulting tensions gave rise to a counter-revolutionary movement, Renamo, (Mozambique National Resistance) developing into a war. In opposition to Frelimo’s materialistic view of society, where the role of spirits was judged mere superstition, Renamo defended and incorporated Mozambican traditional culture. Where Frelimo officials acted against local mediums, Renamo soldiers cooperated with them and even recruited them to influence the course of the war. Therefore the war has been called ‘a war of the spirits’ (see e.g. Geffray 1991 and Wilson 1992)."

At the end of the 1980s, the ruling party Frelimo decided to break with the Marxist-Leninist orientation of their politics and to implement a multi-party
democracy. This happened when after several years of a centrally planned economy and a devastating war Mozambique’s economy was bankrupt. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the World Bank and the IMF were implemented (for an overview see Pitcher 2002). Together with the introduction of neoliberal economic and democratic political structures the Mozambican government also started a policy of re-habilitating pre-socialistic cultural elements. Today the message of Frelimo is that awareness and knowledge of Mozambique’s cultural past will enrich all Mozambicans and be an important instrument to prosper and for the nation to develop further. Change occurred for example in the way the position of traditional healing became perceived as being part of the nation state project, among others through the establishment of the government-supported national association of traditional healers AMETRAMO (Honwana 1996: chapter 3).

Yet, this is not the end of the story. Various Mozambicans, especially in the urban areas, had been exposed to and had engaged in the colonial project, mission churches and Frelimo’s socialistic ideals. They assumed new identities (see e.g. Macamo 2005). Much like Julia’s parents, they became less dependent on their kin and stopped carrying out certain rituals. However, these projects of culture politics did not always bring the expected change. The civil war was a big deception. Even though the subsequent introduction of neoliberal policies and democracy brought new hope for change, where some became richer, the majority stayed poor or became poorer. Uncertainty about gender roles, marriage, and family life increased further. This had been aggravated by the massive rural to urban migration during the war that eroded social structures and decreased the government’s capability to stay in control. At the same time, new livelihood forms were shaped, and practices and spirits from other regions of the country permeated the city. To Julia and others like her, the growing
influences of uncontrollable powers, such as spirits, were disorganizing society. To them, Frelimo’s turn to the spirits is the reason for the failure of the postwar neoliberal and democratic project. Hence, Pentecostalism is a route to finally banish the spirits and related cultural traditions.

The Pentecostal project is all the more pertinent now that another type of spirit spouse has become more active. Rumours circulated about women who were ‘eaten’ by a spirit. When I talked about marriage, persons often said to me: ‘Why is it that so many girls of one family who are handsome and well-educated do not marry?’ To them it was clear that spiritual issues were involved. Lowering their voice as this was a dangerous and serious matter, they said that parents sell their children to spirits to become rich. The parents consult a feiticeiro (sorcerer), who makes them rich. In exchange, they have to give a child to ‘feed’ the strong spiritual powers needed for luck and wealth. This spirit spouse who provides wealth is violent and continuously needs a new child, preferably a girl, because he is male. When telling such stories, people stressed that persons are often unfamiliar with the kind of powers they have to deal with. This is exactly the issue many of them are afraid of, not knowing which powers are controlling them. Because of that, Julia was very angry. Her parents had neglected the ancestors and now her family and she had to suffer because her ancestors and relatives were not protecting them from any harm or even sent evil. She and her three sisters had not succeeded in marrying and their relationships had never lasted. She developed a very negative view on the role of spirits in society. All the more because she was increasingly made aware by the Pentecostal pastors of the dangerous relations she was entangled in.

**Brazilian Pentecostalism and the spirit of pombagira**
Brazilian Pentecostal churches were established in the capital Maputo in the beginning of the 1990s, shortly after the end of the civil war, when a loosening of regulations concerning religious expressions took place after the socialistic era (Cruz e Silva 2003, Freston 2005). Brazilian pastors began holding church services in the empty cinemas of Maputo and their performances quickly became known. People in the whole city heard that these Brazilians exorcized spirits. Mozambicans, who at the time attended these services, emphasized how they were amazed to hear pastors openly talk about ancestor spirits and witchcraft, which was unheard of in an urban centre dominated by a history of culture policies that focused on abandoning ‘backward beliefs’.

The Brazilian Pentecostal churches in Mozambique have neo-Pentecostal features. They are known for their focus on spiritual warfare: a war between God and the Devil, between heavenly and devilish powers. This includes their concern with the cause of misfortune going back in time: ancestors’ involvements with evil spirits have effects on their descendants. Moreover, it promotes the so-called ‘prosperity theology’ or ‘health and wealth gospel’, underlining that a militant and courageous faith brings happiness, health and prosperity in all domains of life.

Another characteristic is the international orientation. The Pentecostal view of the world as the site of a spiritual battle supports a global project to spread the Gospel among all nations. Most Pentecostal churches operate in global networks of exchange, whereby public media as well as the circulation of charismatic leaders, ideas, books and all sorts of other materials are crucial in targeting localities around the world as part of the mission to transform nations, communities, and personal lives through the power of the Holy Spirit (see e.g. Meyer forthc.).
In Mozambique, the Brazilian Pentecostals are successful. Their numerical growth and impact in the public sphere are significant. During the last couple of years, they gained adherents from higher social levels, especially from the upcoming middle class (cf. Cruz e Silva 2003: 112). The churches’ strategy for expansion and conversion relies heavily, as in other countries, on an extensive use of mass media, strategic locations on central places and daily repetition of services focusing on one theme (financial problems, exorcism and spiritual healing, personal development, family & marriage). Both in Brazil and abroad the churches are predominantly active in urban areas (Freston 2005: 37). Especially the Universal Church connects with the ‘yuppie urban culture’ (Freston 1994: 539). In Brazil, the church has been an urban phenomenon adapting itself to the intensifying industrialization and growth of the city that had various implications on family structures. Its ability to adapt to a new urban culture and inherent reproductive issues has also been relevant in Mozambique’s cities. Particularly women are attracted by the Pentecostal focus on the female body, marriage and family. The social transformations have particularly impacted on women’s lives (CEA et al. 2000) to which the Pentecostal practices and messages allude.

During the first years of their presence in Mozambique, the Brazilian Pentecostal churches have been disputed a lot. They were considered to be churches that were run like a business organization, overtaking the country through Brazilian pastors and using all the important buildings in Maputo. Nowadays, the churches have become more and more part of Mozambican society. But, their position remains ambiguous. Even though in almost every extended family at least one person visits or has frequented a Brazilian Pentecostal church, the Pentecostals continue to be contested because of their explicit strategies of destroying ‘Mozambican culture’.
The Brazilian Pentecostal pastors are well known for their fanatic demonization of ‘traditional’ culture. They find it essential to shape a cultural distance towards ‘Mozambican culture’. They express fierce critical perspectives on extended families, ancestral spirits, witchcraft, traditional healing and marriage systems. Paradoxically, the Brazilian pastors create this cultural distance to ‘Africa’ on the basis of a historical cultural nearness in the South-South exchange. They bring their knowledge about their experiences with Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazil to Africa which is presented as the original home of evil spirits that arrived in Brazil via the transatlantic slave trade. Today, the Brazilian pastors cross the Atlantic to combat the roots of ‘evil’.

Spirits that figure in Afro-Brazilian cults are related to occurrences in Mozambique. One of these spirits is the spirit of *pombagira*. In the Afro-Brazilian imagery, *pombagira* is a female spirit who personifies ambiguities of femininity and female sexuality (Hayes 2008). She is amongst others known as Mistress of the Night and Lady of the Cemetery. She is attractive and dangerous and is seen as related to prostitutes. The spirit spouse is also called *pombagira*. Even though Mozambican women’s experiences with the spirit spouse are mostly not linked to prostitution, a similar problem is that women are not able to control their own body because they are involved with evil spiritual forces.

**Converting the spirit spouse**

In this section, the accounts of three Pentecostal women related to a spirit spouse stand central.

*Julia*
Julia, who has already been introduced, worked at a ministry of the government. In the evenings, she studied at an institute of higher education. She had bought her own house. Julia found it difficult to find a trustworthy man to relate to. Various men followed her and wanted to date her. Julia explained:

Various men pay the rent of different houses where their several wives live.

I have my own house. Some men want to rent my house and want me to wait for them. But why should I make myself dependent on them?

She was tired of men who betray their wives, which happened several times to her. When we met for the first time in September 2005, she was single, had been divorced for some years and had one daughter from a former relationship. After she had mentioned the spirit spouse in our conversations, I asked for more information about the spirit. She started to tell more about her last partner, with whom she had lived together for several years. He got a job in Beira, Mozambique’s second city in the centre of the country, thousand kilometers to the north of Maputo. Julia’s friends told her that she would lose him if she did not move with him to Beira. But Julia was not afraid at all because their relationship was perfect. Their plan was that her partner would move first and she would follow later. But then, their contact diminished and Julia found out that her partner had another wife. Julia left for Beira where her relationship ended. ‘I was so furious’, she said. She looked at me intensely and continued:

Never give yourself totally away to a man. Keep a part of yourself to not completely lose your self-worth. To prevent myself from depression I went to the Universal Church. (…) It was witchcraft. His new wife had taken something from me and had thrown it into the sea to send me away from the
life of that man. So my partner became bewitched. Take care; these women from Beira are dangerous. \textsuperscript{xiv}

Looking back, she recounted that a spiritual dream had functioned as a warning sign. But since she had not been converted then, she had been ignorant and had failed to recognize the spiritual dimension of the dream where she had had sexual intercourse with a woman. \textsuperscript{xv} ‘At that time I had no idea that that woman from Beira was asking me to possess my man. Such a dream means that your relationship is over’.

Julia became totally wrapped up in the Universal Church. There she got a new understanding of why her life was the ways as it was. Her eyes were opened to the spiritual bondages of her family that were influencing her life negatively. She recounted how six months before her partner left her she had attended the burial of her father’s brother. She never partook in family ceremonies because that would cause troubles, due to the failure of lobolo and the tense relationship between her parents and her father’s family. When her uncle died, she, her parents and sisters were not welcome to attend the burial but Julia felt she had to go. Less than six months later her relationship ended. Julia explained that as she was unprotected by ancestor spirits, evil spirits happened to come into her during the burial. She said:

I am tired of this vicious circle and want to leave Mozambique. I want to live elsewhere where spirits cannot afflict me. I can send the evil to my sister, but will it make sense?

By going to a Pentecostal church, she worked on getting rid of these spiritual influences. The pastors exorcized the bad spirits from her body.

Following this, she had to work on her complete transformation. She was pushed and encouraged to find a better job, to study, to buy a house and marry the right man. She had to show initiative and was told not to let bad things happen to her
or to wait until success would arrive. Now that she was assured of the power of the Holy Spirit that she carried in her body she would and must be victorious. When I talked to her several years after this conversion process, she looked back at difficult and exhausting years. As a proof of her success, the pastors demanded tithes and extra offerings. The additional costs of her house and study left hardly any money to buy sufficient food and clothes. Her daughter complained several times and recorded the date that her mother would receive her salary, so she could be on time to ask for new shoes. In the end, Julia could not live up to this high demanding lifestyle and escalating tension at home. When a pastor became angry with her poor results, she left the church and spirits started to follow her again.

Yvon

The first time I met Yvon, 23 years old, she had started to attend classes at a school for higher vocational education and had just returned to the father of her child. The father, Yvon’s partner, had sent her back to her family’s home and started to live with a new woman. Therefore, Yvon went to the God is Love church. I became interested in speaking to her, because when during a church service a Brazilian pastor asked those women to raise hands in case they were suffering from the spirit of pombagira, Yvon did so. She was called forward. The pastor put his hand on her head and compelled the spirit to leave her. Yvon started to tremble, fell down and a strange voice, of the spirit who occupied her body, started to say that he was preventing Yvon from being happy with her partner. Later, Yvon gave me examples of how the spirit intruded into her life. Besides the nightly visits of her spiritual husband, the reason why her partner separated from her, she once also had sexual intercourse with her spirit husband when she was using public transport (chapa) in the city. She decided to
stay at home for some time, because it was too embarrassing. People could see the movements of her body. She seemed to imply that men sitting too close to her in the overcrowded *chapas* and their looks at her on the streets provoked the spiritual husband. The way women felt and were perceived when they walked through the city appeared to be related to the actions of the spirit spouse.

Since she started to participate in God is Love, the spirit had calmed down, but had not completely left her as yet. Yvon had to train her body into a new mode by learning to stay filled with the Holy Spirit who would accompany her in the *chapa* and the city streets. Therefore, she spoke with a female assistant of the pastor. This assistant, Mariza (see below), had suffered from a spirit spouse and counseled women like Yvon. She advised Yvon not to sleep naked so that the spirit spouse would not feel invited to visit her.

Yvon learned from the pastors that she became related to the spirit because her parents and grandparents had offered her to the devil. When I was talking to Yvon about her spirit spouse, she anxiously asked me whether I thought that indeed her grandmother or her father would have done such a thing. I suggested her to talk to her parents about these issues. She shook her head. For her this was not an option. Her father was against spiritual practices and would become angry.

*Mariza*

The assistant of the God is Love pastor, Mariza (38 years), also told me about her experiences. She was one of the very few converts I met who knew about local histories of the spirit spouse. About twelve years ago, she migrated to Maputo. Her family is from a province in Central Mozambique. Mariza told: ‘It is said that my grandparents where involved in spiritism and had given their daughter, my mother,
away to a spirit’. One day, a rich man visited her grandparents’ house and said that he wanted to marry the daughter. As they did not want to lose the opportunity of having a rich son-in-law they kept silent about the spirit. The first children of that marriage died. The son-in-law found out about the spirit. It was agreed upon with the spirit that the first girl that would be born would be given to him. The first girl born was Mariza. Mariza said about her youth: ‘I had bad dreams and dreamed of someone who came to have sexual intercourse with me’. Furthermore, at the age of 13, men followed her in the streets, wanting to marry her. With her first husband she had no children. Her mother arranged with the spirit, via a *curandeiro*, that Mariza would have a child but that her husband would leave her. So it happened.

Mariza herself went to various *curandeiros* and prophets from Zionist and Apostolic churches to get rid of the spirit, but without success. Her current husband came to marry her, but Mariza refused. She explained to him that men could not stay with her and that she would start beating them. But the man insisted and they engaged. He got a job in Maputo. At first, Mariza refused to accompany him. When she finally came to Maputo, the struggle started. The spirit began to act violently: she often fell down in the middle of the streets and every time her husband received his salary at the end of the month, she became so ill that they had to spend all their money on doctors and healers.

She was dreaming of a church where everything would turn out right. She asked her husband to bring her to that church. Instead, her husband gave her money to travel back home. She stayed and bought a television, which made her husband furious. One day, a neighbour passed by who invited her to accompany her to the Universal Church. ‘It turned out to be God is Love, but at that time people confused those churches with each other’, Mariza said. She finally went when her brother-in-
law had also heard about this church on the radio. They went together. She liked it. She visited the church again on the next day and a ‘tall black person, a Brazilian pastor, revealed the spirit’. It took one to two years before the spirit really left her. ‘Slowly I started to change my life’, Mariza said. ‘I prayed a lot and threw make up and trousers away [in the God is Love church women do not use make up and ornaments, and wear skirts and long sleeves, LvdK]. It was difficult, the spirit said that he liked me with trousers. My husband told me that it would be better to throw it all away than to stay ill’. Finally, after much prayer, the spirit left her. ‘One night I saw the devil in my dream, he looked very ugly, and said that he would go away because he was tired of God, God had burned him too much’.

Mariza begun to organize her civil marriage. The devil often came back to tell her that she would not marry and until the day of her marriage it was uncertain whether she and her husband would succeed in marrying. On their marriage day, their documents were missing at the civil registration. The pastor prayed for some hours and saw the devil with the documents. In the end, the papers were found and they could marry. Her family was not present since they could not believe that it would be possible for Mariza to marry, they were afraid that something terrible would happen. For some years now, she has been praying, fasting and offering in church to conceive.

Women’s new positions in the public spaces of the city, due to their augmented level of education, professional careers and possession of houses, provoked many discussions on and uncertainties about what should be their position and proper behavior. Could these women take sufficiently care of their home and husband? How should they be dressed, like Europeans or Brazilians or the African way? During my fieldwork period, in 2006, there was talk about a proposal for a law that would
prohibit women to dress in short skirts because their outfit was said to be provoking sexual harassment in public spaces. According to some, sexual abuse was the woman’s own fault, if she dressed like a virtuous woman - and it was sometimes added like a ‘real African woman’ - she would not be harassed by men (cf. Sheldon 2002: 209, 210). These matters were related to the overall insecurity about what Mozambican society should look like. What did it mean to be Mozambican, after colonialism, socialism, a war and now with the neoliberal order? The new positions women were taking seemed to make these questions even more pertinent, because these women were not behaving according to ‘Mozambican culture’. Debates on proper gender behavior often focused on the female body as a representation of ‘the’ national culture (Yuval-Davis 1997). As the future of this culture was precarious and the control of women’s sexuality and fertility had always secured the reproduction of Mozambican society, women’s position was a sensitive issue.

At the same time women themselves embodied the processes of social transformation in how they experienced their body, sexuality and relationships (cf. Spronk 2006). While looking for ways to position themselves in relation to men, families, ancestor spirits and in the urban space, Julia, Yvon and Mariza and others like them struggled - they fell down in the streets, and behaved and dreamed strangely. They had to find a direction to live free of the powers that paralyzed them to be able to shape their lives independently. As spiritual powers play an important role in processes of both stagnation and renovation, women sought those powers that could empower them to move forward.

Pentecostalism provided them a particular understanding and sensations of the processes at work, as well as the techniques to break with negative powers and to use the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about change. The Pentecostal leaders counseled
women in how to know, feel and prevent that the spirit spouse overwhelmed them and took their responsibility and independence away. Praying at a burial, covering oneself with a pyjama at night, distancing oneself from relatives and being alert to dangerous spirits were some of the options to administer one’s life, relationships and emotions, safeguarded by the Holy Spirit. The two Brazilian Pentecostal churches differ in their approach. Both churches recognized that spirit spouses claimed women’s bodies and obstructed education, sexuality, marriage and procreation. Whereas in the God is Love church women make themselves vulnerable towards the spirit spouse by using lipstick and trousers, according to the leaders of the Universal Church, these items could strengthen women’s self-realization as long as women ‘stayed in the Spirit’. xix

In short, by being trained to live with the Holy Spirit, Pentecostal women have different options to play a role in shaping social transformations. However, as will be dealt with in the next section, this happens at a cost.

**Discussion: conversion as embodied spiritual warfare**

Manifestations of spirits in varied forms have been an important item in the study of religion in Africa. Today, spiritual involvement is seen as a ‘natural’ cultural model to feel and experience reality. Especially in the context of discussions on ‘African modernity’, spirit manifestations are seen as showing and offering alternative ways of viewing the world (e.g. Meyer and Pels 2003, Moore and Sanders 2001). In these studies, the modernist assumption of secular rationality is contested. Spirit possession appears to be at the very heart of social transformations. Spirits respond to modernism by incorporating or rejecting its logic and accommodating themselves to forms of modernism. These studies present local religions, like rituals of spirit possession, in a broader framework of the modern global world. Local dynamics are being understood
in a context of global economic structures, and patterns of communication and travel that impinge upon local societies that have to respond to these influences and do so amongst others via multifaceted forms of spirit possession. In this respect, for Mozambique, Honwana (2003) argues how spirits of vengeance, like the spirit spouse, cannot be identified as traditional in a modernist discourse, but is a flexible and dynamic phenomenon that is part and parcel of the politics of national culture and is set in a modern context of market economy, democracy and globalization.

However, what if people do not want to identify and reconcile with spirits and find spirits’ accommodation to modern processes problematic, like the Pentecostals do? Robbins (2007) is very critical about seeing conversion to Christianity as cultural continuity that approaches conversion as part of the logic of an adjustment of the spiritual to new circumstances. Similarly, I encountered that Mozambican Pentecostal women’s engagement with the spirit spouse was foremost a forceful attempt to eradicate the influence of this spirit and related cultural traditions. I acknowledge that conversion may enable people to move back and forth between a past life and a present and future life (Engelke 2004, Meyer 1998, see also Coleman in this issue) and that the Pentecostal focus on evil powers holds ancestor spirits centre stage. Yet, I cannot pass by converts’ experiences. As they (indeed) have to deal with the ongoing influence of spiritual forces, it is important for them that these powers cease to control them. Converts’ effort is to overrule powers that hamper them to progress and become happy and, crucially, they take high risks to do.

Even independent of where we would stand on these arguments of cultural continuity and change, they appear to invoke, more or less explicitly, a discourse of coping. To explain the popularity of Pentecostalism, researchers mostly show how this religion helps people to address the problems of modernity and globalization or to
partake in socio-economic upward mobility (cf. Meyer 2007: page, Van Dijk 2009). But, to converts the violent character of the spirit spouse who ‘eats’ women’s sexuality and fertility, Pentecostalism does not offer help, for example in the form of reconciliation or harmony. On the contrary, violent experiences increase and are fostered.

In the first place, the spirit spouse in general is increasingly experienced as a destructive character. As a spirit of wars and witchcraft, he personifies the failures and problems of social transformations. The spirit does so by ‘raping’ women. In his novels, J.M. Coetzee shows that today, the violence of the former Apartheid era in South Africa not only persists visibly in the political arena but also in the most personal and intimate relationships. The novels (see e.g. Coetzee 2000) portray the tensions of everyday life with incest, rape and sexual assaults (cf. Bähre 2002, Niehaus 2002). The spirit spouse also personifies a violent history of almost two centuries (see note iv), including the recent civil war and the ‘big war of maledictions’ of a new socio-economic era in which women have to find new roles. The inherent tensions are expressed in violent sexual and social relations: the inability to love and to belong either presents itself in possessive forms of sexual relations or in a failure of having a satisfying sexual and marital relationship. In both forms, sexuality becomes destructive.

Consequently and in the second place, Pentecostal women who attempt to divorce from the spirit through ‘the burning power of the Holy Spirit’ enter a dangerous realm where a powerful spirit and those people related to him do everything to protect their position. Women’s attempt to control their own lives starts a war of spirits. Women dare to take this risk because the universal power of the Holy Spirit is considered to be stronger than local spirits. Lengthy, detailed and regular
testimonies, for example about the devil walking away with important papers, are proof of converts’ dedication to the spiritual war. But converts also have to show that they are successful. Signs of their progress should materialize in a marriage at the civil register, tithes and financial offerings, an independent attitude to relatives and a conscious and controlled behavior in the city’s streets. Thus far, Mariza was thriving. But Julia had a burn out. Yvon felt that she had to distance herself from her (grand)parents. Moreover, Julia’s sister who had converted as well suddenly felt very ill and almost bled to death. According to the pastors, her sister had not dedicated herself sufficiently to the project of conversion.

Conclusion

Colonialism, mission churches and socialism have not succeeded in banishing cultural traditions and the presence of ancestor spirits in Mozambique. Therefore, according to converts, now Pentecostalism must do it. In contrast to former projects of societal transformations, the Pentecostals take the spirits seriously, not by reconciling people with spirits as the government and local healers stimulate in the current democratic neoliberal era, but by further breaking down spiritual connections.

Women in particular engage in this religious project of conversion. Because of their central role in the biological and socio-cultural reproduction of society, they embody the social transformations in specific ways to which the spirit spouse attests. The spirit reacts to women’s new socio-economic positions by interfering in intimate relationships: women fail to love, relate, marry and conceive. Through their conversion women declare war on the spirit. Pentecostalism forces them to take initiative and to be in control of their body. Converts forcefully break with the influence of spirits and relatives in their life. By so doing, they take a high risk. They
are no longer protected by the family, which in a country as Mozambique is a very insecure move when one’s life is considered to depend on kin. However, it is exactly this dependence converts want to eradicate.

At the same time, converts must show that they are converting effectively. They must constantly demonstrate that they are achieving everything that failed before, such as for example a marriage. Their conversion is a continuous battle of showing that they are independent, self-conscious and fortunate. While the violent impact of the civil war, of spirit spouses and the dependence on relatives are being eliminated, they convert into a new war with its own violent characteristics. Whereas women’s bodies had served as gifts of reconciliation in the past, they convert their bodies into soldiers of the spiritual war today. Thus, as part of social transformations conversion not only helps to deal with changes, but forcefully pushes change.

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Bibliography


**Igreja, Victor.**

INE


In the churches and conversations, the spirit spouse was named *marido espiritual* (spiritual husband), *espirito da noite* (spirit of the night) or *marido da noite* (husband of the night). The *curandeiros* -local healers- speak of *xikwembu xamathlari* (spirit of a person killed in a violent way) or *xikwembu muhliwa* (spirit of a person killed or stolen through witchcraft) (cf. Bagnol 2006: 181). Throughout the text I will use the term spirit spouse.

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2 *xikwembu xamathlari*

3 I spoke with several local healers from different regions in Southern Mozambique in 2006 and 2007.

4 Depending on the region and specific family histories, the exact process of reintegrating the spirit differed, but central was the need of a gift for compensation, often a girl. The *curandeiros* located the origin of this practice in the 19th century when major social changes took place in Southern Africa as a consequence of the migration of Nguni groups (*Mfecane*). One such a migrating group invaded the Tsonga territory in Southern Mozambique and established the Gaza empire. One of their chiefs, Ngungunyane, became famous for his violent wars aimed at incorporating groups in other parts of Mozambique in his kingdom, like the Ndaus of Central Mozambique. Since the Ndaus were murdered and enslaved against their will and some of the dead Ndau bodies could not be properly buried, they came to revenge themselves in the Nguni and Tsonga families by their capacity of *mupfuka*; the spirit of the dead person could resuscitate (cf. Bagnol 2006: chapter 4, Honwana 1996, Langa, for comparisons see e.g. Honwana 2003, Igreja and Werbner 1991: 151-152; 188-189).

5 In some accounts it was stressed that next to the girl also a boy was given to the spirit. The logic is that because of the boy, the girl will be able to marry a physical husband. This husband’s family pays *lobolo* to the spirit of the girl. With this gift the spirit allows the boy to find a woman. The children that are subsequently born out of the boy’s marriage will carry the spirit’s name, ensuring the spirit’s full reintegration and compensation of his death.

6 What actually caused the civil war in Mozambique has been the topic of extensive debates (see amongst many others Cabrita 2000, Dinerman 1994, Hanlon 1984, O’Laughlin 1992).

7 *xikwembu muhliwa*

8 Principally the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the Pentecostal Church God is Love.

9 The Brazilian Pentecostal Churches in Mozambique could be placed into the so-called second and third Pentecostal movements in Brazil (Anderson 1994: 72-74; Freston 2000). Further, Brazilian missionaries work in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church. Several churches maintain links with churches in Brazil. Besides Roman Catholicism, Islam and various forms of Protestantism, African Independent Churches have been influential since the beginning of the 20th century (see e.g. Helgesson 1994).

10 The churches do not have a record of members. According to the preliminary results of the latest census, about 20% of the inhabitants of Maputo are Evangelical/Pentecostal (INE 2009).
On the importance of the South-South connections in Pentecostalism, including Brazilian Pentecostalism in Mozambique, to create a critical cultural reflection see Van de Kamp and Van Dijk (forthc.).

The term *pombagira* was foremost used in the church God is Love. In the Universal Church I mainly heard the term *marido espiritual* (spiritual husband), but pastors normally spoke about cases related to Afro-Brazilian religions.

29 January 2006

25 June 2006. Beira, a city related to Renamo and the Ndu, is often negatively addressed by Southerners who are generally more in favor of Frelimo and are disapproving about Ndu spirits who revenge themselves, like the spirit spouse (*cf. Bagnol*).

This was the only time that I encountered someone referring to a *female* spirit spouse.

I met and talked a few times to Yvon in May 2007.

21 November 2006 and 9 March 2007

Interestingly, the women afflicted by a spirit spouse in the Pentecostal churches are from various regions in Mozambique. The variety of regional and historical origins of the spirit spouses, however, is not important. Spirits with different origins, from different Mozambican regions or the spirit of *pombagira*, can all be expelled during the same liberation session.

For the scope of this paper I do not go into detail about the differences between Pentecostal churches. The churches have both different and similar strategies for converts in the context of cultural change. I do also not focus on gender views and practices in the churches (but see Van de Kamp forthc.).