Risk, Mistake, and Generational Contest in Bodily Rituals of Swazi Jerikho Zionism

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ABSTRACT
This article situates an approach to ritual efficacy and risk by focusing on bodily rituals of the Swazi Zionist Jerikho church in socio-historical context. The Jerikho church distinguishes itself by the use of purgative hallucinogenics and a circular march-run, both of which are meant to invoke the embodiment of holy spirits. This article analyzes the risk inherent in the procedures of rituals and how risk manifested in two cases in 2010 and 2011, which challenged bodily and social wellbeing and ritual knowledge for both church members and the broader public. I show how harmful ritual mistakes were explained away and enveloped within co-existing systems of religious and socio-medical knowledge by way of the intergenerational social relations through which the rituals were produced. Church elders attributed mistakes to youthful incompetence, which reaffirmed the organizational and cultural practice of the Jerikho church and elided with a public moral discourse about risky youth and HIV/AIDS.

Introduction
On any given Sunday morning in urban Swaziland, neighborhoods become religious soundscapes of people singing, clapping, and hustling as they engage in weekend worship services that often follow night vigils for funerals or inter-church celebrations. One particular church, the largest Christian church in the country, Jerikho Zionism, punctuates this soundscape in a particular way, ebbing and flowing in loud song to instill in its members and church spaces the presence of holy spirits. The intensity of this church's rituals in volume, veracity, and effect on the body became the subject of scrutiny in 2010 and 2011, raising concerns about both violence and socio-moral conduct. Questions about how and why these rituals work (or do not work) are timely. Jerikho ritual and healing practices are important for members within and beyond the church and they are seen as importantly palliative and providential in the light of the present public health crisis that plagues Swaziland. The small African kingdom harbors the world's highest HIV prevalence and, for this majority Christian nation, such religious resources provide hopeful solutions to existential and medical problems surrounding the epidemic.

This article presents a case where un-intended violent ritual outcomes present challenges to diverse participants and a system of religious ritual knowledge. In the case of the
Jerikho church, members’ interpretive and social responses to these outcomes involved a re-conceptualization of outcomes as mistakes in Ute Hüsken’s analytic sense, rather than failures, by distributing in-competence of religious knowledge and responsibility for un-intended outcomes to certain ritual practitioners. While evoking uncertainties and contest for others in the church, ritual mistake does not amount to inefficacy or overall failure of religion as a cultural system. Indeed, Andrew Stewart and Marilyn Strathern argue that any ritual is broadly instrumental with diverse efficacies. While some ritual mistakes like those discussed here can be tragic or violent, they generate new conversations, protocols, and practices for different participants to achieve certain outcomes and aspirations, be they individual or collective. Thus ritual may also provide compelling evidence for ethical revaluations in a social field.

This article specifically analyzes two rituals in the Jerikho Zion church to demonstrate how evaluations of ritual outcomes as mistakes reproduced authorial social relations across generational lines and reconstituted conventional notions of ritual efficacy. In other words, ritual mistakes shored up explanations of how a ritual should have properly worked. I question not only how mistakes in ritual manifest analytic conceptions of risk, but also how moments where risk as danger, death, and violence do manifest are in turn employed to reconstruct and distribute religious knowledge about ritual action and social relations. In this case, despite the fact that ritual mistakes were noticeable and provocative, some church members aimed to reproduce their social and religious authority and thereby re-legitimate the forms of their rituals.

While all ritual is inherently risky in proper enactment of procedure and realizing expected outcomes (Howe; Hüsken), the rituals analyzed here carry a greater potential for misfire, due to their content and form. These rituals do not condone violence upon bodies of the practitioners or spectators, but are objectively turbulent or potentially harmful to practitioners. They comparably constitute what David Bromley (289) deems “spiritual edgework”, religious ritual practices that “challenge the presumptive safe limits of human activity”. Still, such rituals and their participants have “rules that draw the line between the proper performance … and actual harm” (Palmer 149) and the ethnographic task is to situate where and how these lines are drawn and redrawn. It is in this potential for harm or violence in a particular socio-historical context that I situate an analysis of compromised rituals as manifest risk and demonstrate how knowledge and interpretation of in-efficacy are reproduced through particular social relations.

Contemporary Crises of Generation

An enduring HIV/AIDS epidemic has disrupted economic, social, and family systems in Swaziland, which has had several implications for intergenerational relations. Neoliberal economic policies in Swaziland, and in many other countries, amid HIV/AIDS (Hickel) provide limited opportunities for formal wage labor, especially for youth. Without the ability to develop income, families have been unable to pay for their children’s schooling and younger adults’ university fees and thus equip a younger generation with the requisite skills for work in Swaziland or abroad. Retrenchment in the local economy and in historically situated migrant labor circuits via South Africa (Simelane and Crush) has further blocked the potential for earnings important for household social reproduction by both younger and older adults. Trade patents on antiretroviral medications limited their initial rollout and
thus patients’ accessibility. Indeed, economic policies affect healthcare systems in pernicious ways to inform a social epidemiology of HIV/AIDS (Hickel), which has affected youth in particular.

Swaziland harbors the world’s highest HIV prevalence, where almost one out of three Swazi is HIV positive, and the greatest proportion of seropositive persons is made up of young adults, affecting women more than men (Bicego et al.). Age patterns of mortality, like elsewhere across East and Southern Africa amid the epidemic, have aligned with this disease distribution and engendered socio-structural inversions where youth predecease elders. Women tend to occupy an inferior position in the Swazi social structure, which has been polygynous, patriarchal, and patrilocal, compounding their entrance into transactional sex as some women flee marriages. Marriage itself, a foundational life-cycle conjuncture that solidifies obligations of care-giving and exchange across families and generations, has given way amid economic precariousness to multiple concurrent affective-sexual partnerships, effectively driving HIV transmission (Hirsch et al.). This has presented practical, social, and existential concerns about an evident “generational inversion” where notions of socio-structural succession and alignment are disrupted (Golomski, “Generational”). In response to such existential and social concerns, the kingship resurrected customary age-grade chastity rites on a national basis for young women as a means to curb HIV transmission (Reis), while in ordinary households, parents and guardians conceptualized youth as particularly wayward or risky, in turn making claims on youth development and wellbeing by using customary idioms of work and ritual (Golomski, Right). The case of the Zionist church discussed here shows how amid HIV/AIDS, inter-generational mutuality—contest and cooperation between generations—is mediated through popular forms of Christian religious belief and practice (van Dijk; Werbner).

**Culture and Christianity in Swaziland and Jerikho Zionism**

These conditions are the grounds from which people innovate cultural practices with objectives for generational re-alignment and reproduction. In doing so, many Swazis have drawn on both customary and emergent ritual resources. The work of social reproduction in this context takes place within a patently Christian vernacular, reflecting the long and complex history of mission Christianity intertwining with indigenous religions to constitute religious synergism. Newer aesthetics of Pentecostalism have also emerged through cosmopolitan élites and media channels since the mid-1990s, inspiring public discourses and imaginaries of global Christian communities.

Most Swazis identify as Christian, although the country is also very traditionalist and ruled as a divinely inspired, absolute, and dual monarchy. King Mswati III governs as political and spiritual leader in tandem with his mother Ntombi Tfwala, the Queen Mother, and the civic calendar year is marked by a series of national collective ritual events to restore the potency of kingship and engender ecological and social fertility. These events include ‘first fruits’ or harvest rites of iNcwala (December) and Buganu (February) as well as Umhlanga rites (August) where the age-grade of unmarried girls collects reeds to rebuild the Queen Mother’s reed fence, liguma, and for other ceremonies. Like other societies regionally, the Swazi polity has historically organized the population into age-grades based on gender and generation to accomplish agricultural, military, and ritual duties. Age is thus an over-determining factor in cultural identity and public life. Across social domains of household,
church, and politics, a dichotomy of generational categories of youth (bantfu labasha) and elders (bantfu labadzala) discursively structures everyday interactions and ideations of the life course and aging. Youth are to be raised in respectful deference, inhlonipho, to their elders in childhood and adolescence, ideally becoming socially mature when they marry and are able to be moral providers or care-givers for elders and, in turn, their own young children.

The Jerikho Zion church is a useful case to illustrate the synergy of Christianity and traditionalist cultural forms. Analytically, the Jerikho church can be characterized as an ‘African Independent’ or ‘spirit’ church within the anthropology of Christianity (Meyer; Werbner). In Swaziland, Jerikho and other Zionist churches like it are historically situated and widespread in popularity and make up the largest group of religious practitioners. Zionism here is a denomination of Christian Protestantism, which was introduced across Southern Africa by American missionaries from Illinois at the turn of the twentieth century. In a time of expansive and diversified mission activity, yoked to the broader regime of settler colonialism, local concerns about social life in transformation bred new prophetic religious movements like Zionism, with many followers seeking answers to questions about major social, economic, technological, and epistemic change (Cabrita; Comaroff).

Early on, Zionism, of which Jerikho is a sub-branch, became powerfully sutured to Swazi socio-political hierarchies. The Americanist Zion prophet Daniel Nkonyane’s first Swazi convert was a sister to two wives of King Bhunu (b. 1876, d. 1899) and successive Queen Mothers in the reign of their son, King Sobhuza II (b. 1899, d. 1982) who steered the nation through Independence from British colonialism in 1968. Nkonyane and his followers remained close to the royal house, allegedly healing them of metaphorical and physical blindness (Sundkler). Today, Zionist and other spirit churches are favored by the state—‘they are married to kingship’, bayaganwa neNkosi, in one local idiom—and the state annually hosts national ecumenical ceremonies for Good Friday and Passover at the national stadiums where many Zionists congregate. A number of well-respected members of Parliament are also Zionist or Jerikho leaders and, in the 2010s, the kingship commissioned an interdisciplinary study by the University of Swaziland to investigate Jerikho history and politics as the church entered a heated battle over which of the founder’s sons might succeed in church leadership.

The Jerikho church emerged in the 1940s after its Swazi founder Elias Vilakati received visions from the Holy Spirit while he was jailed as a migrant laborer in a South African prison. After returning to Swaziland where Vilakati received further visions and performed healing miracles, he quickly accumulated many followers. Today, the church has an extensive bishopric and holds powerful sway in one of the national ecumenical bodies, the League of African Churches. It is known as ‘Red Gowns’ or ‘Red Dress(ed)’, zigubo ezi(m)bomvu, because of the members’ particular attire that contrasts with the majority of Zionists who dress in white, green, and blue (Kiernan, “Wear”). There is a small but robust theological and anthropological literature on Jerikho history, rituals, and political life (Sundkler; Fogelqvist; Ndlovu; Cummergen).

Zionists and Jerikho are perceived to be part and parcel of Swazi social and ritual life. Today, the most common ritual events in the kingdom are funerals or secondary phase mortuary rites like purifications held on weekends and associated with deaths from HIV/AIDS. On the weekends of night vigils especially, Jerikho congregations often go en masse in mini-buses to sing, bring collected food, money, and small gifts, do ritual healing, and show compassion for the bereaved. They often otherwise engage in their own non-funerary
night vigils that bring together multiple congregations to do similar rituals and engage in cross-congregation administrative issues. I spent a total of eight months over two years documenting the worship services of one urban-based Jerikho church and traveling with members on weekends to do rituals for both members and strangers. Zionists’ spiritual power and rituals are perceived as undoubtedly efficacious, albeit sometimes disturbing for non-Zionist Christians, which brings me to the discussion of the two distinctive rituals under consideration here: siguco and siwasho.

**Jerikho Religious Rituals**

Aside from Jerikho members’ audacious attire—bright red and multicolored robes adorned with ropes, chains, keys, animal prints, and appliquéd insignia of celestial bodies—the church distinguishes itself from others in two particular bodily rituals: siguco and siwasho. These are not the only Jerikho rituals, but rituals that are evidence of a particular case of ritual efficacy and risk explored in this special issue. While other Zionists undertake similar rites (Kiernan, “Canticles”, “Wear”), Jerikho forms involve a different intensity in members’ bodily participation, as will become evident in the ethnographic description. Through both rituals, members aim to achieve embodiment of what they experience as holy spirits, verbally indexed by shrieks, sweats, and convulsions, and by directly addressing or speaking to their spiritual possessors.

**Siguco** is a circular march that turns into an eventual run and is performed at worship services and other events. The siguco is turbulent and is meant to bring God and holy spirits into the church space and into members’ bodies through ritual action. It involves a group of church members, most often men, running in a tightly contained circular formation in the center of the church building. Anyone may run the siguco and, while both men and women participate when it first commences, women usually drop out and men finish the run. Through their collective power in running and the centrifugal flow of their robes, spiritual powers descend through the running circle. In the main church I documented, the run took place around a central support pole of the building; the center of the circle is spoken of in terms of a ‘ladder’—iladi, derived from Jacob’s ladder in the Bible—connecting heaven and earth. Non-runners abet the others in a gendered division of song, where men gruffly and almost monosyllabically chant ‘Amen’ and women wail the same word in a drawled manner. The runners get very sweaty and dizzy from running quickly during the ritual, which can last up of 25 minutes.

The run wraps up when one or more pastors slow down the chant or slacken the pace of their own running to immobilize the congregation. The running ceases and the members crowd together in a tighter circle, sometimes jumping up and down or marching in place. Around this time, the whole church swells into a single more muted prayer and congregants drop down to their collective knees. When the prayer finishes, some runners, at this point possessed by spirits, leave the church shrieking to wander in the nearby churchyard, letting the overwhelming power dissipate from their bodies. Throughout the remainder of the worship service, which includes member testimonies, sermons, and singing, members sporadically shriek, cough, whistle or otherwise intermittently verbalize their spiritual embodiment. The worship service concludes about one to two hours later with a second siguco. Many of the same runners participate. In its second iteration, members of the church who are suffering from particularly acute social, spiritual or medical problems may kneel on
the ground as the other members surround them to do the march-cum-run. This placement enables the afflicted to receive the full power of the descending spirits.

The second rite under analysis here is the ingestion of purgative hallucinogenics called *tiwasho*. *Tiwasho* is the plural of *siwasho* and these hallucinogenics are firstly purgatives or medicinal elements meant to purify, clean, heal, and remove foreign and dangerous contagions or evils from spaces and human bodies. The majority of *tiwasho* elements or substances include blessed waters, salt, animal blood, powders, ashes or tinctures from particular plants or minerals, which are mixed and used for the literal ‘washing’ of afflicted or symbolic parts of bodies (hands, feet, shoulders, joints) in order to heal. Jerikho worship spaces are opened for services by burning *tiwasho* incenses of dried shrubs in a dish placed at the church door or at the building’s center pole. The smoke and fumes are said to dissipate evil spirits and make the space cleaner for church members to commune with God and with holy spirits. A man has the task to sprinkle the mixture on the ground where members will run the *siguco*, both spiritually to purify the space and materially to dampen dust from being kicked up by many running feet, as many Jerikho churches are usually small enclosed structures with earthen floors.

Some *tiwasho* are ingested. These are prepared by specialists in a church and consumed by some members, mostly men, to facilitate embodiment of holy spirits. The practice of *kwacha tiwasho* takes place when specialists concoct *tiwasho* and use them themselves to facilitate spiritual insight into patients’ problems. *Tiwasho* are water-based drinks and may include salt, sugar, fruit juice concentrate, milk, and in some cases ‘methylated spirits’—ethanol with methanol or isopropyl alcohol additives otherwise used for fuels or cleaning agents. This element of some *tiwasho* is objectively alarming, but like other cases of toxicity in healing practices (Trotter), it can be explained as a situated ethnomedical perception about the substance’s efficacy and symbolism. Jerikho members distinguish their purgatives-hallucinogenics from other Zionist churches’ substances called *indayela*, which are often tea- or coffee-based mixtures used for similar purposes of exciting its consumers. While one major aim of *siwasho* is total expulsion of contagion, church members know this is not possible and there must be some degree of practical commitment as well as stated commitment to God to avoid it to be otherwise.

For the majority of Swazi, Jerikho Zion rituals especially evince a sense of traditionalism. Traditionalism connotes ancestors, local nature spirits, mystical powers of kingship, and other figures often deemed ‘evil’ by the pronouncedly Pentecostal ‘ministry’ and mainline Christians. The embodiment of holy spirits in *siguco* appears to these Christian Swazi to be like demon possession or diviners surrounded by influential ancestral shades. However, most Swazi understand a congruency between *tiwasho* and traditionalist medicine, *umutsi*, in that both are non-biomedical African substances perceived to heal afflictions in the expulsion of foreign agents. They both have the function to purify and ‘enliven’, *kuphilisa*. Even in ministry or mainline churches, an uneasy value conflict persists where these healing forms are not completely rejected, because, on the one hand, they are perceived to have practical efficacy on bodies and the world and, on the other hand, they are held up as forms to fight against in the local ecumenical field and as part of Pentecostal projects of spiritual warfare (van Wyk; Meyer).

During my research of this church, I documented two notable mistakes in *siguco* and *siwasho* that, when one takes a holistic perspective, reflect social concerns about generational relations and identity associated with demographic shifts in respect of HIV/AIDS. As youth
predeceased their elders in society broadly, elders ratcheted up moral discourses about proper ritual procedure for youth to re-align the generations. Youth’s incorrect performance of Jerikho rituals evoked a discourse on intergenerational mutuality, in that youth were not properly growing as moral beings, partly because of improper socialization into ritual practice. Correct performance entailed spiritual embodiment as indexed by the actors’ physical experience and verbal utterances, but the forms of this embodiment by youth were marked by elders as mistakes. As I shall explain in the following two sections, in these rituals involving bodily and vocal expressions of their contact with divinity, youth were overly spirited or tragically silenced.

‘Roaring in the Spirit’

The first discussion of ritual mistake and inefficacy centers on siguco. Members learn how to do this rite by observation and by instruction by male elders or the church bishopric, a social group within the church that also affirms its authority in the context of ritual performance. In some of the worship services I attended, a senior pastor described to congregants how they would properly conduct the rite. In 2008, one senior pastor explained certain procedural elements in this way:

[Siguco] shouldn’t disturb or injure a person. Get it? It shouldn’t be silent, but hey, when we are joining into it, we are following the person who is doing it in front of us and is getting swept up. I’ve got to teach you this thing, saying, "Amen, Amen…", but don’t hit one another. Just keep going to the right, to the right, to the right. If you overtake someone, hey, just keep going to the right, to the right, to the right!

The circle is supposed to move counter-clockwise and, in larger gatherings, there may be simultaneous circles of movement, a larger group of worshippers encompassing a smaller group. The congregation laughed at the potential doubling-up. The senior pastor continued:

This is how it goes, my job is to teach. Someone must advise on these matters. Hey, let’s go do it now, and don’t clap your hands. We’re not going so slowly, so small-like, we are going in our way.

He began a song and, after a few minutes of slower circulation with several younger men, the siguco ignited into the quick run, with the chorus of women abetting the human flow. In these instructions, there is clear acknowledgment that the rite should be noisy and turbulent, not ‘slow’ or ‘small-like’, but it is not something that should injure participants.

Despite these instructions, it became evident that many church members, especially the older men and women who did not run the siguco found some executions of the rite and its aftermath to be reprobate. Again, following the completion of the siguco rite, members would alternately give testimony or sermons and sing. However, giving testimony was often difficult for both speakers and listeners as well as for more precise ethnographic translation and transcription, as the air was pierced by shrieks, whistles, loud sighs, and other noises of possessed members, which disrupted an audible flow. Many of these older men and women were also respected preachers or instrumental members of the church (they facilitated money collections or organized transport for night vigils) and leveled criticisms at some young men, saying they were too loud when they embodied spirits during and following siguco.

Criticism honed in on several elements of siguco that were deemed to be performatively excessive. These included possessed members falling down and rolling around within the church itself during and after the run, intensive and repetitive shrieking, and members breaking off bits of the buildings, foliage or other objects in the churchyard. In one example from 2010, amid punctuated shouting, a middle-aged woman calmly stated,
When we roar in the spirit, we fail to discern anything. We should cry nicely in the spirit, not like some of these young men. They make useless noise. It seems that the spirit is now a meaningless noise. If it were up to me, God would stop this spirit business because it is failing the church. Preachers no longer rebuke members due to the fear of an exodus from the church, hence the disorder that has now characterized the Jerikho church. Amen.

In this instance, coming into the spirit through siguco is graded along a line of intensity, where an extreme performance of the rite prevents any sort of mental comprehension for both the runners and the other worshippers. Here, high energy in running and shrieking is deemed an ineffectual surfeit. Upon reflection, this woman cast her opinion more widely to the effects of the acts on the church itself, noting that its persistence was indicative of organizational internal strife, which she chalked up to an intergenerational concern between young men and older pastors.

At another service in 2010, a man noted during his testimony that

In some of our churches, no preaching is actually taking place simply because members get high in the spirit and disturb the whole service. As Jerikho members, we should be ordered and not disorganized and chaotic. I was so blessed when our bishop emphasized that we should have adequate time to preach and listen to preaching.

Here the criticism is directed toward the punctuating shrieks that interrupt the sermon, rather than any procedural element of the siguco itself, although this noise derives from the possession-induced run. Shrieks, whistles, coughs, and other utterances are indices of spiritual presence and are thus valuable as evidence of Jerikho Christian personhood. Eight interviews with church members in 2008 made it clear that members did not feel themselves to be in control of the change in their voices or of any outbursts once they embodied holy spirits in the ritual. Yet this criticism, among others I documented, focused on the inability of some members to experience or engage spiritually in a non-disturbing way, conducive to a more harmonious, less loud or chaotic service overall. The man tied this, too, to the organizational, age-related hierarchy of the church by invoking the bishopric who are all male elders.

In these two instances of intergenerational mutuality, older church members complained that young men became too volatile in entering the spirit through siguco. The public audacity of young men in the spirit, however, had a certain charismatic awe (Werbner). Young men were able to command a physical, publicized presence through intensive and loud ritual performance. In denser urban spaces like the church I primarily worked with, it was not easy to miss them during the day and throughout the night on weekends. During some night vigils I attended, larger groups of ‘roaring’ young men would attract small crowds of spectators that included both church members and passersby who would watch in awe as the young men thrashed around. The intensity and subsequent visions and voices, in some cases, were interpreted and taken up by some young men who took their experiences as grounds to prophesy and make claims about church process and leadership. The channeling of volatile spirits into prophecy was also of concern to a number of church elders, one of whom made these remarks at a service in 2011:

One hears youth speaking the truth of God. We even hear this in our own church. Elders complain that what is it that boys can tell them, saying, “hey, that boy is young and knows nothing!” It is evident today even, and the tables are turned. What does a young person know? It is possible that today one is ruined as well by them. My question goes back to the issue of how we see prophets. I personally don't like prophets because they destroy families. How can your parents nurture you only for you to want them dead? Once you call me, I will run away because I don't know whether you will be right or wrong. When we're sick, we run to these prophets and they lie to us. I pray that God will help me see the right prophets.
In the church elder's perspective, younger members of the church were dangerously charismatic. Congregants might be drawn to their power in vulnerable times, seeking answers in the face of dire questions about health and dying, but the same congregants would be misled because such prophets were inexperienced know-nothings. Breaking out of their conventional deferential social role represented an affront not only to the ideal parent–child relationship, but also to the ideal of the church bishopric–church layperson relationship. Prophetic, energetic youth, in the eyes of elders, were circumspect, even if they were also harbingers of social regeneration for a diseased nation and God's presence. Yet in the case of siguco, the veracity and volume of youth were not taken as evidence of nearness to holy spirits. Rather, they appeared as disingenuous. Their mistakes pointed to transgressions of conventional ritual execution because they upset intergenerational relations, yet their execution did not compromise the total collective work to invoke spiritual presence in the church. Spirits came in loudly, but for many it sounded suspicious.

**Family Tragedy**

The second ritual mistake for analysis surrounds a single event in 2010 involving siwasho that made national news headlines in Swaziland. Tiwasha substances are visibly present at many worship services, but more so in the form of purgatives to cleanse the church space itself, while ingested siwasho are more furtive and are consumed by fewer members, away from the public space of the service or, again, during the week in private healing consultations with specialists. Around Christmas that year, I spoke with 80-year-old Mdvubuto Gama at a homestead in a small mountain hamlet called Nsukumbili. Gama's immediate family had experienced tragedy two months earlier when they lost three of their six children in a single weekend. The three children—two teenage boys and one of Gama's brother's grandsons—went off late in the evening to a nearby relative's homestead to attend a night vigil. When they arrived, an uncle named Mabandla prepared the mixture. Allegedly, Mabandla's wife took the siwasho out of the room momentarily during its preparation. The boys and four others drank the concoction so as to stay up all night and to open themselves up physically better to embody holy spirits in siguco, prayer, and other ritual actions.

The boys left the vigil in the morning, but became sicker and sicker when they got home. Mdvubuto and others saw imminent danger as the boys vomited and became unconscious. By the time an ambulance had reached their remote community and ferried them to the hospital, the four had all died from poisoning. One of the survivors who also drank the siwasho noted that it had tasted sweeter than other siwasho he had had, an indication of potentially high levels of methanol. This survivor and the others who drank it did not become ill, which led to suspicions that the boys had been deliberately poisoned by Mabandla or his wife. These suspicions fueled familial inter-lineal antagonism over the next couple months and, with the help of a family member who was also a police officer, Mdvubuto and his wife eventually left his brother's home where they were residing out of fear for their lives. When returning there later to collect some personal items, they felt their feet swell as they moved through the homestead, for them an indication that they had been bewitched. Before they left the homestead, they used another siwasho mixture to purify the houses in which the boys had slept and performed another purgation after the boys' funeral.

There is a more complex micro-sociology of the extended Gama family that must be considered in the analysis of ritual mistake. Mdvubuto's own father had seven wives whose
many sons competed for land and material resources in Nsukumbili, undoubtedly fueling some competition and jealousy among the segmentary patrilineages. What was striking, however, in the national news coverage and in local conversations about the event, were claims that these boys were most likely violable youth who were otherwise engaging in risky behavior. One newspaper article wrote (Ngozo), “Thabo [one of the deceased sons] was noted as also liking to drink umcombotsi [maize beer]” and that he was “a keen fan or guzzler”, insinuating that the boy was a delirious, unaware drunk. Another newspaper article quoted a Jerikho bishop who proclaimed,

They should not add things that are not from God, to be highly spirited should come from God not self made. They were already advised not to drink that thing in the area, and they should have listened to their church leaders. (Nhleko)

Surprisingly, in my interview with him, Mdvubuto told me that, although he suspected foul play, he had already felt that the boys would meet some demise because of their incessant youthful behavior. He said,

I used to chase these boys and take them back to school. They refused and would not return otherwise. I remember one day forcing Thabo to go to school in the morning when he was still enrolled. I finally decided to leave them alone because I just saw that I could kill them [for not going to school]? This thing happened to them all and they left school altogether.

It was evident that the boys’ 80-year-old father and their mothers struggled to keep their sons on a moral, institutional path through adolescence and yet there was also a sense in their explanations that the boys were already careening out of control. Their families, church, and school were seen to be unable to intervene. Broadly, in the discourse surrounding the ritual mistake, the boys met their demise in part because of witchcraft-like nefarious inter-lineal hostilities, but also because of their own waywardness and moral transgression.

Discussion and Conclusion

Craig Palmer notes that ritual and its perceived successes and or harmfulness are construed through types of changing social relations. In this respect, an evaluation and discussion of ritual mistakes in the case of the Jerikho church must account for the broader social field in which rituals unfold and how certain social relations provide the grounds for criticisms of ritual mistakes and how those relations are reaffirmed or remade through the mistake or criticism. Ritual criticisms are in one aspect evaluative. They are leveled from particular vantage points and are inherently comparative as they refer to other rituals in the past or in idealized forms (Grimes). These cases show how the generational identity of elders became the comparative vantage point for an interpretation based on age-related concerns. In addition, the cases of mistake in the Jerikho church show how, when the inherent risks of ritual manifest themselves, even in destructive ways, this does not necessarily make up an overall failure for a religious community’s members and religious ritual knowledge maintains credibility through moral assessment.

The analysis of ritual here also implicates differently scaled notions of violence or harm in considerations of ritual inefficacy and risk in social context. In both cases, Jerikho ritual outcomes—noisiness and death—were subject to intense scrutiny and were explained or commented on through particular standards of ritual practice, as to why these outcomes occurred and what effects they would have on diverse actors in regards to age.
In contemporary Swaziland, parents, teachers, policymakers, and political ‘elders’ face a crisis of social reproduction from HIV/AIDS that implicates their own social status and future wellbeing as youth—who are expected eventually to care for their elders as they both age—die off. Schools, churches, youth-centered NGOs, and the kingship’s traditionalist age-grade ceremonies are seen as important venues to instill proper behaviors and ideas in youth as a moral socialization in adulthood. In the case of the Jerikho church, had the Gama boys stayed in school, listened to or followed more intently the commands of their father and the church bishopric, they would not have met their fate. Likewise, young men in the church should refrain from ‘roaring’ so as not to upset both the ritual procedure and the church’s age-related hierarchies.

Indeed, the notion of disruptive youth in spirit churches like Jerikho is recurrent, historically and regionally. In a comparable example of Botswana’s urban Apostolic spirit churches, Richard Werbner shows how young men skilled in wild, spirited whirling and dancing, in a formation similar to siguco, have become powerful prophets and upset the churches’ constitutional principles of parochialism. They are deemed to be ‘holy hustlers’ by church elders and other members for upbraiding parishioners they are supposed to heal. When these younger prophets break away to start new churches, the social field becomes tinged with suspicions, accusations, and agony about both new and old churches’ organizational futures. Studies of Zionist churches in Swaziland (Cummergen; Nyawo et al.) argue that similar dynamics of succession and secession in Zionist churches are moments of public and political importance that will affect Swazi society more broadly. Comparatively, the often fraught social reproduction of intergenerational relations in Southern Africa can thus not be understood outside the inherent procedural risks of major regional religions’ rituals.

The local religious rhetoric of youth’s moral subjection to elders may not speak directly to the region’s major political economic and social concerns amid the HIV situation—there is still little possibility for youth for wage-earning opportunities if one is biomedically healthy in adherence to antiretroviral medication and has a good education—but it does envelop ritual mistakes in an explanatory framework which addresses social concerns surrounding intergenerational mutuality, which have been foregrounded by the epidemic. Wider concerns about disrespectful interactions across generational lines collude with concerns about the efficacy of particular rituals when they misfire or, more specifically, when they are ‘misexecuted’ according to some negotiated standards (Grimes; Hüsken and Neubert). Rather than call out the efficacy of the ritual itself, and by proxy the ritual’s healing potential for social and bodily afflictions in this critical historical moment, church elders explained away these outcomes as mistakes due to youth’s age-related incompetence. The rituals went wrong because youth did not know what they were doing or because those youth had ambitions that went beyond the moral scope and purpose of the ritual itself. This explanation reaffirms elders’ authority in the church as leaders and arbiters of esoteric religious ritual knowledge and creates an intergenerational distinction of youth and elder Christians. Hazardous ritual outcomes become evidence that elders must continue to guide youth and their church to achieve religious and broader socio-political goals. By determining how and why ritual actions were mistakes, Jerikho elders shore up credibility for the church’s rituals as well as replicate conventional forms of religious ritual knowledge and efficacy where the inherent risks of rituals might otherwise present dissonance between idealized forms and real practices.
These cases also present questions about risk manifested as harmfulness, which are important to consider in a socio-historical context of people suffering from a disease epidemic. Where are the thresholds of acceptable harm on actors, how are inappropriate forms or poor outcomes discerned, and why might actors accept or ignore ritual harm, given their socio-demographic and epidemiological surroundings? Bromley (289) notes that extreme ritual forms show how ritual actors’ “empowerment and control are socially constructed”. Rituals engaging the thresholds of safety and harm often symbolize or posit this tension and then resolve the tension through actors’ (conventional) performance of the rite. In effect, this creates “a set of accounts that neutralize the possibility of mythic disconfirmation” (Bromley 289) in that mistakes are due to forms of human fallibility rather than epistemic incongruences of religious ritual knowledge. This effectively preserves notions that ritual will always be or is efficacious. For example, in cases of ritual snake-handling and fire-walking, bites and burns are evidence of the rituals’ real contingencies and potential harm, but these manifest risks are said to be due to actors’ egoism, rather than commitment to divinity or lack of unity within the religious community that faces suffering.

The Swazi Jerikho case shows how the contingencies are laid bare in ritual instruction and everyday social practice. Everyone acknowledges the veracity of siguco as well as the potential toxicity of too much methanol in some tiwasho concoctions. Adherence to ritual forms where potential risk is more explicit, however, persists as members undertake ritual in order to realize commitments to divinity and religious communities that involve forms of social organization, namely intergenerational mutuality, from domains beyond the church. For elders in households, politics, and schools, youth are immature and not adept in embodying forms of social and religious knowledge in their actions, a condition ameliorated by youth’s proper subjection to paternalist forms in the broader patriarchal, monarchical society. The project of restoring conventional forms of generational succession and continuity is made all the more pressing under the duress of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and economic precariousness. Jerikho religious rituals are palliative and providential means for both church members and non-members to achieve wellbeing amid these conditions. Wellbeing emerges through ritual action inducing spiritual experience, but the social conditions for its possibility are tempered by localized relations of age and generation.

What do these findings portend for the wider scholarship of risk, ritual, and generation in African social life? Bridging this work with Paul Cummergen’s study of Zionism and Swazi politics, we can return to his notions of succession and secession with a nuanced eye toward the diverse spaces and discourses within which such socio-political processes occur. With regards to Zionist political life in the kingdom, he notes, “leaders die out and leadership must be passed to a new generation … and this question will have to be dealt with in the near future” (Cummergen 382). The dynamics of succession across generations is historically fraught, especially in customarily patrilineal and non-democratic states like Swaziland and elsewhere in Africa (Aguilar). The political tumult of King Mswati III’s succession following his father Sobhuza II’s death is a case in point (Magongo). Attention to religious ritual discourse and action and the dynamics that sustain it as an efficacious and pervasive system of knowledge gives insight into why (or why not) generational succession happens the way it does and how it cross-cuts or operates across several social domains (van Dijk; Golomski, “Generational”). Leaders like the elders in the Jerikho church specifically have been able to reaffirm conventional systems of religious ritual knowledge and practice that likewise
shore up their positionality vis-à-vis youth. Locally, ritual mistakes derive from age-related ritual incompetence and the failure to accommodate to presumptive moral standards. In this small place in Africa, in the wake of HIV/AIDS, regeneration of majority Christian religious communities, and indeed the nation state at large, is contingent on the proper socialization of youth and is forged through ritual action. While ritual mistakes are tragically vocal, ritual’s flexibility as produced through social relations permits the encompassment of mistakes and does not evacuate efficacy from a religious system in total.

Notes

1. Church members spoke about a plethora of spirits, which included what could be construed as a paramount Holy Spirit of the conventional Christian Trinity. They used siSwati terms like *Umoya loyingcwele, Livi*, and others to refer to this paramount Holy Spirit, but in instances of possession, interviews, and general worship service exegeses, members spoke about the presence of plural spirits, *imimoya* or, in English, ‘a spirit’ rather than ‘the spirit’. Thus I interpret Jerikho’s field of transcendent phenomena to be populated by multiple holy spirits.

2. Funerals are ubiquitous events. I conducted 94 semi-structured household surveys across five urban and rural communities, where funerals were cited as the ritual performed most often today, where respondents altogether reported attending a total of 475 funerals in the past six months. 185 of these funerals were attributed to HIV/AIDS deaths.

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References


