

## ENWINDING SOCIAL THEORY:

### WIND AND WEATHER IN ZULU ZIONIST SENSORIAL EXPERIENCES

#### INTRODUCTION

In this article I will place wind and weather at the center of a long healing process. The case study revolves around Thandi, who was one of my main informants and a good friend during three years of fieldwork in a Zulu Zionist congregation.<sup>1</sup> I first met Thandi through Themba, the founder of the congregation and the kingpin in my research network and in charge of Thandi's healing process. Themba made his living at a governmental institution, where he prayed for and treated clients during his lunch breaks. However, the main activities of the congregation were based in Themba's home situated in an African township outside of Durban, South Africa. The township was at the time plagued by political violence (cf. Jeffery 1997:354ff.), crime, poverty, and rapidly growing informal settlements as people fled to Durban to escape violence and years of drought in the surrounding rural areas.

Thandi encountered winds, which blurred any clear distinctions between weather as an observable objective fact and the internal,

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<sup>1</sup> My main fieldwork was conducted from January 1991 until June 1992, and for 12 months during 1998–99. Up until today, I have regularly stayed in touch with Thandi's family, and visited them on a few occasions during shorter field trips.

idiosyncratic and personal realm of a spiritual encounter. The other participants in the congregation did not experience Thandi's aerial encounters during my fieldwork. Yet they were part of a larger sensory affordance to the world that was not alien within the group, or within the larger southern African cultural landscape. Furthermore, Thandi was an Anglican with no prior involvement with the Zionist movement, and was surprised when the winds that had whistled through Zulu history for centuries permeated her body. I will therefore not introduce Zulu Zionism as such, other than underscoring that it has long been considered the largest and most rapidly growing branch of the African Independent Churches (AIC), which started breaking away from the Mission churches during the 1870s, experiencing an exponential growth from 1915 onwards (Barrett 1968; Sundkler 1948; cf. Comaroff 1985). Furthermore, healing has for long been recognized as a defining characteristic of the Zionist movement (cf. Sundkler 1948: 152). The general picture that emerged from several hundred illness narratives I collected was that Themba's patients suffered from violence, poverty, loneliness, and illnesses closely associated with African life in a racist apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa (cf. Flikke 2006).

In order to reflect upon this I will explore a recent approach to the 'weather-world' (Ingold 2010), which treats human relationships to the atmosphere as species-specific. I will argue that there is a need for a close diachronic study of Zulu conceptions of, and relations to, aerial phenomena in order to properly grasp Thandi's engagements

with the weather-world. I will moor this discussion through a focus on three ethnographic traits. First, I will outline the role of birds in Zulu ritual practice; second, the significance of wind for ritual spaces; third, the importance of the auditory relations between landscape and wind in rituals. This will provide the foundation for a theoretical approach where I suggest that movement in the weather-world structure natural human sensory experiences as culturally specific, historical engagements with the natural world.

Before I start this discussion I will introduce Thandi and outline the backdrop of her encounters with the winds.

#### THANDI: WINDS, VIOLENCE, AND RESTORATION

At the time we met, Thandi could best be described as a reluctant, yet devote Zionist. She was explicit that she became a Zionist to deal with certain afflictions, and that her aim was to leave the Zionist movement in order to rejoin her Anglican congregation. A life as an Anglican would give her the freedom needed to pursue her ambitions as a hard-working, intelligent, upwardly mobile African woman who saw and grabbed the possibilities that opened as apartheid crumbled. She claimed the Zionist ritual practices were far too time-consuming, laborious, and expensive (cf. Flikke 2006). Though I will not discuss the details of the ritual processes here, she also expressed disgust for some of the rituals she underwent.

About a year before we first met, Thandi started to have troublesome dreams and visions. She told me that she began to fall asleep, often in the middle of the day, and immediately had terrifying dreams. She saw people she loved in pools of blood; she dreamt that she was safe at home when all of a sudden blood started to flow into the house—running over the doorsteps and down the walls. At this time, Thandi started to yawn and experience uncontrollable hiccups.

Thandi took the dreams to be messages from the ancestors and was worried (cf. Berglund 1989: 97–102; Sundkler 1948: 265–275). She therefore went to a number of traditional healers, *izangoma*,<sup>2</sup> who told her what she already feared—she was in danger. One story resurfaced during the consultations; the healers tended to point out Thandi’s mother as the culprit. They told Thandi that her mother was jealous of her growing prosperity, and that she wanted to control her income until she was properly married. She had finally resorted to witchcraft in order to get the share she claimed was rightfully hers. The dreams were warnings from her ancestors, who tried to protect Thandi from the witchcraft her mother used to gain control over her.

Thandi lived with her young daughter and a niece in her teens in a single-family house she had purchased in the same township as Themba. One evening a few months before we first met, Thandi received a surprise visit from her sister Mamkhulu. The four of them were getting ready for bed when five men approached the house and asked if Thandi lived there. Thandi reacted quickly, said no and

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<sup>2</sup> Plural of *isangoma*, the traditional Zulu diviner.

locked the door. The men withdrew to the street and discussed something before they forced their way into the house. In the meantime, Thandi had escaped through the back door and disappeared. They attacked Mamkhulu and tried to break into the bedroom in which the two girls had locked themselves. The girls' screams warned their neighbors, who fired warning-shots in the air. The men withdrew across the street and took Mamkhulu with them. She was later found alive in a field close by, but spent weeks recovering from the brutal attack.

After the attack, Thandi lost her footing in life. She was scared to leave the house, fainted on a regular basis and had problems doing her work. It was during this period that she got in touch with Themba. The two of them had met at a bus stop after work a while back, and in a few short months Themba got Thandi back on her feet.

Thandi's dreams changed shortly after Themba started to treat her. The recent dreams all contained images of and experiences with flying, wind, and water. One night she woke from a dream that made her unable to sleep. She described the experience as if a hole opened between her breasts and the shoulder blades in her upper back. A wind started blowing and created a draft through the hole. The draft throbbed so intensely that she was awake the rest of the night feeling the wind blow through her. At this point Thandi's face—always full of life and joy—froze and her quick, inviting gaze became distant. After a moment of silence she added "it was not windy outside". The next day she was unable to work because of the pain. She drew a parallel to a

similar experience a while later. This time she woke up with a feeling she described as being hit by a boulder. She bounced up and down in bed, and started to speak in tongues as well as in English, a language she mastered but never used at home.

Though Thandi's oneiric encounters with nocturnal winds and levitation can be explained away as phantasmal, occupying the confounding borderland between slumber and wakefulness, it was nevertheless life-transforming occurrences that put her back on her feet. In this article I will argue that we need to give air and weather analytical priority in order to come to grasp with Thandi's experiences. Though it is true, as Bachelard once quipped, that "air is a very thin matter" (1988: 8), it is puzzling that air until recently attracted surprisingly little attention in social theory. The lack of focus on air and atmosphere might help explain why social scientific literature seldom treats experiences similar to Thandi's as legitimate ontologies. This has taken place despite the fact that we know that weather and climate are central to the human experience and exert a strong impact on social life. We also know that religions all over the world closely relate air and wind to the notions of spirit, and hence to a sphere outside of human influence and control (Donner 2007).

Parkin (2007) has accounted for the ritual significance of air, wind, and smell for both the Swahili-speaking Muslim and Bantu-speaking non-Muslim populations along the East African coast. This applies to Zulu as well. In Zulu *umoya* depicts "spirit", "soul", "air",

“wind”, and “breath”.<sup>3</sup> However, the Zulu did not leave the weather to the pleasure of God but continuously strove to influence it through the ritual work of “heaven herds” (Berglund 1975; cf. Livingstone 1857: 23–25; Raum 1973: 233ff.). I will argue that this active engagement with the air and weather has been an ongoing process in Zulu Zionist circles up until today, and can be used to account for Thandi’s experiences as one of many ways to live in and interact with the weather-world.

In order to set the baseline for my argument, I will outline a recent approach to weather in social science.

#### AIR AS MATTER: WIND AND WEATHER IN SOCIAL THEORY

Tim Ingold is one prominent social theorist who has pondered as to why weather has been so understudied (e.g. 2005, 2007; 2011, part III). He argued that the reason for this lack of analytical investigation is that since Descartes, the Western world has increasingly conceived of life as existing on the external surface of the globe, thus turning humans into “exhabitants” who are composites of body and mind, residing in a world of matter and a world of ideas respectively (cf. 2011: 96 and 116). This occurred alongside developments in which the vision gained prevalence over the other senses (Urry 1990), and the relationship between an observing subject and observed object

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<sup>3</sup> The KiKongo term *moyo*, translated as “soul” or “life force” by Janzen (Janzen 1978: 179, note 7), was discussed in the same context as breath (ibid.: 175) and dizziness (ibid.: 177).

became increasingly disconnected. As Foucault (1973) famously argued, the medical gaze fixed the location of the body in space, increasingly policing and hence solidifying the boundaries of a body that used to be open, highly porous and to a larger degree belonged to, and influenced by, the external world (cf. Harris, Robb, and Tarlow 2013). In this world of increasingly separate and labeled objects and subjects, the ground under our feet became the source of stability and the material subsistence for life, while the atmosphere retreated to become a passive backdrop through which mobility and olfactive, visual, and auditory perception occurred. In this modernist understanding of nature, the surface of the landscape marks the limits of materiality and the air is for the most part conceived of as immaterial, an empty space that allows for the interaction between human subjects and material objects (cf. Ingold 2005: 103). In short, we have an ontology that places surface before medium, and thus misrepresents the intermingled relationship between bodies and the air.

Ingold followed the lead of Gibson (1979) and turned this ontology on its head, understanding the world as being comprised of earthly substances and an aerial medium in which we are immersed (2011: 116). However, Ingold departed from Gibson's view of the world as "furnished" with objects, arguing that we instead need to resort to Heidegger's vision of a world that cannot be described by nouns, but as an emerging world of growth and motion (ibid.: 117ff.). In a similar vein Bachelard stated that with air, "Movement takes precedence over



matter” (1988: 8). Thus, rather than taking the landscape as the surface on which human activities are played out, we should view weather and the earth’s atmosphere as the central medium through which most human actions occur and seek to capture it through verbs. In Ingold’s account, the earth is “neither an object in space nor a space for objects (...) the earth is ‘earthing’” (ibid.: 114). This reversal creates a world where human life, rather than being founded on a solid stable earth, is emerging as spun on “a fragile ephemeral raft” (Ingold 2005:103), that ties human experience closer to fluidity, flux, transformations and transience. As images of mobility, transformation, and emergence, aerial phenomena are better described through verbs than nouns. As such the ontological reversal Ingold suggested promises to place flux, emergence and change in the midst of social theory and his ontological reversal fits well with the fact that air is the foundation of human existence. Without air and breathing there is no life. In line with Ingold’s argument, we could therefore say with Robert Chapigny that “air is breathing rather than what a body breathes” (in, Bachelard 1988: ix).

The weather-world is hence the medium through which humans perceptually engage with the external world and thus has the capability to influence perception of and engagement with the world as emergent process. Air then, is inseparable from life and consubstantial with the sensing body as our “setting in relation to the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 303). As such, the weather-world has the capacity to “affect the whole of consciousness” (ibid. 1962: 136). The

“lightness” and “thinness” of air are the essence of life and enables movement. On clear days we do not see the air, but we can feel it touch the surface of our skin; we can be aware of it when we see clouds pass over the horizon; we notice it when we study birds that soar, rising effortlessly on its currents. For Nietzsche, this openness, motion and unbounded nature of air constituted the very substance of human freedom (Nietzsche 1883–1889; cf. Bachelard 1988: 136).

As the medium through which life emerges, olfaction and hearing—powerful, perceptible presences of things distant—make incense and vague incoherent sounds an expected part of religious practices. Odors constitute perpetual, continuous bonds that relate a subject to the past and the present in ways not to be ignored by social theory (cf. Classen et al. 1994; Flikke 2014). In this sense, we could argue that air has universal phenomenal aspects to it, tied to the fact that smells are processed in the limbic system, which is the emotional center of the brain. It has also been argued that “up” and “down” and “light” and “heavy” are orientational metaphors that contain innate moral values that might be difficult to express without referring to the vertical axis that aerial metaphors span (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This fleeting nature of air makes it somewhat resistant towards a stringent language of science, yet potent as metaphor of height, depth, falling and soaring—dream symbols par excellence. Within this interpretive framework Thandi’s experiences with flight are clearly joyful dreams of lightness, freedom, new possibilities, upliftment, and growth (cf. Bachelard 1988: 33f.). They were encounters that literally

‘enwinded’ her, rejuvenating her spirit enough to reinstate her as an acting subject in charge of her own destiny.

The question remains, however, of how culturally specific historical developments influence our engagements with the weather-world (cf. Harris, Robb, and Tarlow 2013: 167). Thandi’s oneiric encounters with winds gives me a chance to go beyond weather-worlds as a universal, human affordance (cf. Ingold 2011, ch. 9; 2010) and analyze them as bodily expressions that emerge from local haptic engagements with the weather-world. As such, Thandi’s encounters with winds needs to be considered as local engagements with nature (cf. Tsing 2014).

I will now elaborate on three aspects of the ethnographic material that will illustrate the significance of times and places when air materializes as an integral aspect of the landscape. The first is the significance of birds as creatures that soar on the frictions created between landscape and wind. The second focuses on mountaintops and beaches, which were singled out as important ritual places because they were infused with metaphysical ‘tracks’ carried through the air. Finally, I will link ritual places to the sounds that emerge from the interaction between landscape and winds. With this background I will return to the theoretical discussion.

If we invert a depiction a Tshidi gave Jean Comaroff, we can say that the air for the Bantu “is full of forces and powers” (Comaroff 1985: 128). Deeply embedded in Zulu cosmology and ritual practice is the significance of birds as creatures that occupy the spaces where the materiality of air is manifest. Birds are regarded as physical manifestations of the ancestors (Berglund 1989: 119).

A central part of every ritual process I attended was referred to as *ilathi* [altar]. The *ilathi* aimed to set up a bridge of communication with the ancestral spirits of the afflicted, and always implied the slaughter of chickens to establish contact with the ancestors. As I inquired about the issue, Themba stated:

The fowls, actually in the traditional set-up of African people, they represent the spirits. Because each time a person has to slaughter a goat, a fowl, he has to address the spirits through the fowls. That ... ja, “Today I’m bringing you this offering. Please ‘so and so’ take care of me.”

This corresponds well with the significance of birds in pre-colonial Zulu society. The pioneer missionary Callaway commented on the roles of birds in myths he collected, writing that, “(i)t is ‘the little birds’ which are mediators and messengers, coming with their tale of warning or instruction” from the ancestral spirits (Callaway 1868: 130). He further recollected how his Zulu teacher’s brother was well-

known for his accurate prophecies through the interpretation of ‘bird talk.’ This interpretation is a direct parallel to divination through a spiritual power referred to as *abalози*, which I will return to below.

Birds soar on the currents created as the winds interact with the characteristic rolling hills of KwaZulu-Natal. Consequently, birds straddle the gap created through the interaction between the invisible air and the surfaces of the landscape; their very habitat in the intersection between landscape and atmosphere reveals the power of the winds. Birds soaring on the currents—a manifestation of the connections between surface and medium—reveals that the atmosphere is not an empty space but one of many surfaces in the world (cf. Ingold 2011).

Chickens were given special ritual attention. Up until the end of the nineteenth century many Zulu people still did not eat chicken. Since chickens had arrived with the Europeans, they “knew nothing about it” (Webb and Wright 1976: 201) and hence would not eat it (cf. Webb and Wright 2014: 266). During the reign of King Dingane (ca. 1795–1840) people were prohibited from keeping chickens. The Norwegian missionary H.P.S. Schreuder explained this decree, saying that Dingane’s most powerful *inyanga* had revealed that the crowing of cocks had caused powerful thunderstorms.<sup>4</sup> From this, we can reasonably assume that the removal of chickens from the Zulu kingdom was a measure taken to secure the king’s power base,

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<sup>4</sup> Letter dated May 1, 1846. Norwegian Missionary Society archives, box 130, folder 1.

following ongoing internal struggles over the crown and the encroaching colonial presence. The link between the crows of the cock and the fierce power of thunderstorms revealed that chickens were viewed as a powerful ingredient in the Zulu herbal medicine *umuthi* because of the influence they had on the weather. The cock was potent enough to bring about the spiritual powers associated with thunder.

The same winds that carry the birds as messengers from the ancestral realm also have the ability to transport substances with the capacity to impact human lives in significant ways.

#### WIND, ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND MISFORTUNE

Once storms gather, clouds thicken and the winds turn violent, carrying cold, rain, sand, dust and debris, wind can also be the very epitome of destruction and uncontrollable fury. Storms are chaos; something you cannot physically grasp and fight, yet they are capable of grabbing hold of you and carry you along at the mercy of fate.

Vicious thunderstorms are a regular occurrence in KwaZulu-Natal. Lightning is naturally feared for its power to kill, but is also perceived as 'heat' from the 'Lord-of-the-Sky.' It is said to be a result of his anger [*inthukuthelo*] and a physical manifestation of power [*amandla*]. Mountains are struck relatively often by lightning and hence become infused with spiritual power from the 'Lord-of-the-Sky.' Mountains therefore become potentially polluting places, due to

‘tracks’ left behind by the lightning (Vilakazi 1965: 24f.).<sup>5</sup> Yet the association between mountaintops and lightning ensures that mountaintops are sought out as places of worship, healing and restoration (cf. Ngubane 1977:25). Once a month, Themba would lead us up to the cairn at the highest mountain near his house for a night-long ritual process.

In Zulu cosmology, all substances have metaphysical qualities. As we move through the landscape, some of our substances are shed and left behind, whereas others are picked up (cf. Ngubane 1977: 24ff.). These are the tracks [*umkhondo*] that dogs pick up while hunting, and is a cultural trait shared with the neighboring Khoisan (cf. Low 2007: 75). Disease was mostly spoken of as *umnyama*, ‘darkness’ and translated as ‘bad-luck’ in English (cf. Flikke 2006: 211ff.). *Umnyama* was caused by pollution and whenever we crossed tracks left by humans or animals associated with darkness, such as hyenas or certain snakes, we were exposed to defiling forces that would eventually make people and animals sick unless properly strengthened through ritual means (cf. Beinart and Brown 2013: 210ff.).

The ‘tracks’ can also float in the air as ‘threads’ that connect people and places (cf. Ingold 2011: 121). In this case they are spoken of as *imimoya*, plural of *umoya*. *Imimoya* can be inhaled, and if these

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<sup>5</sup> The connotation to heat is also accounted for by Krige (1936: 175), who noted that the Zulu would bury people struck by lightning by rivers to be cooled. If not, the heat of the corpse would cause drought in the area.

aerial threads are defiling, *imimoya emibi*, they will pollute and result in disease (Ngubane 1977: 24ff.). These tracks become particularly troublesome in large cities, plagued by pollution and an abundance of people. The then well-known *inyanga* [herbalist] and leader of the Traditional Healers Association, Mr. Mhlongo, expressed his- and the organization's concern with the spread of Zulu healing practices to urban street corners. In an interview regarding the *umuthi* street vendors in Durban he said: "They are not traditional healers, and they should be arrested for treating people on the streets where the wind blows everything onto those herbs" (The Natal Witness, November 7, 1995). Even the healing herbal remedies *imithi* [pl] can be infused with the dirt of the cities and be transformed from a health bringing remedy to a carrier of illness, misfortune and 'bad luck,' (viz. darkness). Once polluted, *umuthi* would generate illness and suffering for the users rather than healing. Hence, people would at times sneak out at night to be ritually cleansed at market places, crossroads, and busy thoroughfares, where the pollution was shed, picked up, and carried away by strangers who passed through during the day. However, the members of Themba's congregation preferred to retreat to the beaches where the saltwater would cleanse the afflicted and carry the pollution far away, ensuring that it did not spread suffering to innocent people.

Though I will not go into depth on the connections between wind and witchcraft in this article, it is worth noticing that Monica Wilson gave similar accounts of the close connection between winds,



illnesses and destruction. “The witches,” she wrote “fly by night on their pythons, or ‘on the wind’” (Wilson 1951: 91). In this context, the wind transports the witches and their evil deeds, thereby spreading disease and devastation. The air could also be a medium through which witchcraft [*ubuthakathi*] was spread. The culprit, Adam Ashforth informs us, could hold the *umuthi* in the palm of his hand and blow the powdered substance into the air to be carried away by the winds, tracking down and striking the victim (2000: 126).

The presence of witches and their evil deeds could not be seen, but rather sensed in the air. The Zulu “witch finders,” Krige wrote, ‘smelled out’ [*ukubula*] the witches. As he danced towards the suspects, he “examine(s) them by means of his olfactory sense” (1936: 225), following the threads in the air left behind by the evil doers. The perception of witchcraft, as a substance of a negative, forceful and dark appearance, therefore has certain olfactory qualities. This finds a parallel in Khoisan notions of both wind and witchcraft (cf. Low 2007), as well as in the costal areas of East Africa, where Parkin argued it is because smell “wafts on the wind that it is of crucial importance” in ritual contexts (2007: S41).

Winds, then, carry smoke and odors, thus weaving perceptible threads through the atmosphere; threads that connect people and places in ways that cross time and space, potentially bringing humans in touch with substances from places associated with pollution and disease. These southern Bantu conceptions share common ground with the early Victorian practice of quarantines, which perceived

diseases as an aspect of place (cf. Flikke 2014). As such quarantines were a way to keep healthy and diseased places apart, not people (Armstrong 1993: 394f.). In the above ethnographic material the Zulu winds clearly have the ability to connect diseased and healthy places, thus being an essential disease vector.

The missionary Bryant also discussed the attention paid to odors brought by the wind, referring to an elderly woman obviously bothered by the smell from the new steam train moving some seven miles away. The scent, not noticeable to Bryant, was described as *bopile* [suffocating] (Bryant 1949: 109). Though Bryant did not place this discussion in the context of contagion and disease, the overall ethnographic evidence suggests that the acute awareness of olfactory signs are best understood in the context of Bantu notions of health and disease, where foul smells were carriers of misfortune.

'Bird-talk' and chirping, were also of spiritual importance. These sounds float in the air, bringing subjects in contact with distant spirits, places, and people. These auditory aspects of air are often overlooked aspects of ritual processes since they are not carriers of linguistic meaning. They are, however, essential for the creation of a ritual atmosphere.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> There is a recent, growing literature on atmosphere and ambience that I will not go into in this article (see e.g. Adey et al. 2013; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2008).

## WINDS AND THE SOUND OF SPIRITS

Mountaintops and coastlines are open spaces, spaces of contact and predation, places where things become visible (cf. Bachelard 1988: 136). These are favored locales for Zulu Zionist ritual activities, and are characterized by their exposure to winds. Having spent many nights on mountaintops with Zionist informants, I have vivid memories of how we were gradually exposed to the wind on gusty nights as we climbed the hill towards the cairn at the highest peak in the surroundings. Likewise, during the many cleansing rituals I observed on the beaches around Durban, we would face the winds blowing in from the Indian Ocean, with its powerful waves favored by surfers from all over the world. The winds at these locations would interact with the surroundings, speaking as they whistled over the mountaintop or mingled with the sounds of the waves pounding the shoreline, carrying sounds from afar and, at times, drowning the voices of those standing next to you.

In this context it is interesting that the Nyakyusa word for “witch,” *abalози*, means “the one that travels with the wind” (Wilson 1951: 91). This is the same word the Zulu use for the practice of divination where the diviner [*isangoma*] sits in *umsamo*, the place where the ritual artifacts of a household are stored, and interprets whistling sounds coming from *ikhothamo*, the sacred area in the thatching at the back of the hut (cf. Berglund 1989: 119). These whistling sounds created by the winds are the voices of the spirits. In these divination practices, the wind whispering around the huts

carries messages from the ancestral spirits. I claim that the same messages from the ancestors emerge when the wind mingles with the landscape, filling the hollows of the ground with sounds as it blows through valleys, whistling as it grabs hold of mountains and caverns. The presence of the ancestral spirits—referred to as the *abaphansi*, ‘those down below’—was also sought out in canyons, by waterfalls, and caves. These are permeable places, openings to the ancestral world below, and were places filled with the auditory presence of the unseen. These sounds made the places come alive when the winds grabbed hold of the crevices of the landscape, filling the air with an audible presence of the ancestral spirits.

However, Thandi’s case illustrates a more profound aspect of human engagement with the weather-world. The winds she encountered were wild, unruly and painful. They not only made the landscape come alive with sounds that were interpreted as messages from the spirits, they also opened her up and blew through her as through the caverns and caves of the landscape, filling her with pain, but also enough life to counter the negative effects of the violent attack she and her family experienced. Bruce Kapferer recently pointed out that despite the fact that rituals largely aim to grasp the human predicament from positions external to the afflicted, the large majority of ritual studies are thoroughly human-centric (2013: 24).

Picking up the challenge from Kapferer, I will suggest a theoretical approach that places the weather-world as a central element in the structuring of the human senses. Within the Zulu

weather-world, where air and wind disperse 'good luck' and 'bad luck' to those exposed, sensory engagements with wind will naturally be different from those predominantly conceived of as an empty space.

#### WEATHER, PERCEPTION, AND THE OPEN BODY

The winds at the mountaintop where we gathered the first Sunday of every month howled over the landscape and grabbed hold of our bodies. We bent over, flexing our muscles to withstand its force. On these occasions the bodies of the afflicted took shape from the will to resist the power of the wind. The force and lightness of the wind shaped the force of the spirit. The two are not only signified by the same word, *umoya*, they were both haptically present when the winds touched the afflicted at these places of worship. The afflicted moving in this ritual landscape were physically challenged to rise, stand, lean against the force of the wind and move forward. These were bodily motions that I started to notice influenced the atmosphere as the gathering was gradually filled with the lightness of the air and spirit as we approached the summit (cf. Bachelard 1988: 156). Thandi's particular encounters with the weather-world make further sense once we look at the relations between bodies and the winds of *umoya*.

As discussed above, the threads in the air (*immimoya*) point towards a tradition in southern Bantu thought that perceives winds as sources of both disease and health. Bryant noted that for the Zulu, the illness *umkuhlane* [the common cold] was brought by the winds. Certain winds were therefore threats to health and avoided when

possible (cf. Bryant 1909: 17). Though the historical material on the role of winds in Zulu concepts of illness and epidemics is scant, some relevant insights are accessible from the work of Ranger and Ndava in southern Zimbabwe (Ranger 1988, 1992). Discussing the significance of the Spanish influenza pandemic of October 1918, Ndava writes:

Some elders in the Chibi district believed that the influenza came just like a ‘wind’ from somewhere ... probably it was the ‘wind’ of blood which had flowed freely in the great war. It was traditional knowledge that in most cases, wars’ aftermaths were inevitably followed by diseases. (In Ranger 1992: 265f.)

This material provides a glimpse of an explanatory model that can account for the shedding of blood in warfare and the ensuing epidemic deprivations that followed in the wake of battle and the imposition of colonial rule. The shedding of blood and the general destruction that polluted Zulu soldiers could be spread by the wind. Zulu war tactics and their use of the assegai—a short powerful stabbing spear used to disembowel the enemy in combat—caused the bloodshed.

Thandi’s accounts bring together the traces of *immimoya* carried by the winds and stabbing pains, as her upper body was opened and filled with wind. The fact that Thandi’s experience of the stabbing took the form of wind blowing through her open torso suggests a strong connection between wind and stabbing pains in the upper chest. This

is confirmed by historical sources. The hole in her chest is well-known and described in the early ethnographic studies of the Zulu peoples from the early-nineteenth century onward. Callaway accounted for symptoms similar to those Thandi experienced when he referred to a phenomenon called *uthlabo*, from the verb *ukuhlaba*, to ‘stab.’ He wrote:

*Uthlabo* is known by causing a sensation of perforation of the side; and the man says, “I have pain under the armpit, beneath the shoulder blade, in my side, in the flesh. It causes the feeling as if there was a hole there; the pain passes through my body to each side.” (Callaway 1868: 268)

This was an illness that could have a natural cause and be treated with *umuthi*. However, if it persisted after treatment the ancestral spirits caused illness by “walking in the person” (ibid.). This was a sign that the person had a call to become a diviner, and they would then refer to the illness through the synonym *ukxulo*, derived from the verb *ukukxola* [stab]. Callaway further informed us that the successful treatment of *uthlabo* would make the illness diminish because “his people are in him. They wish him to dream” (ibid.: 270). During my fieldwork, the most common term used for similar physical experiences was *isibhobo*. In English, they described it as being ‘stabbed.’ The term was mostly taken to be a symptom of witchcraft. The wind carried the witchcraft substances in Ashforth’s above-

referred account, piercing and entering them into the body of the victim on impact. The stabbing sensations caused by *isibhobo* indicated that the substances of witchcraft penetrated the victim.

The stabbing nature of Thandi's encounter with winds was also an experience of being compromised and opened by metaphysical forces that merged her fate with the qualities of the substances the winds carried. Despite the pain, her experiences were positive; the fact that the winds entered through the chest and were accompanied by vivid dreams of flight and water indicated an ancestral intervention. Pains in the chest and shoulder blades are a sign of ancestral presence in the afflicted since the chest and upper back is "the place they occupy in a man" (Berglund 1989: 115). In other words, we cannot take for granted that our own experiences with winds as grabbing hold of us and blowing around us is the natural affordance to the weather-world. I will now outline how diverging knowledges of the body and atmosphere can also be rooted in different haptic styles.

#### KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE, AND THE SENSES

In a comparative study of sensory experiences- and descriptions of the pulse in Greek and Chinese medical traditions, Kuriyama critiqued the often taken-for-granted assumption that the "true structure and workings of the human body are (...) everywhere the same" (1999: 8). Ideas of the body, he claimed, are not only exploring different mental constructs or epistemologies, but should be extended to explore differences in sensory experiences (Kuriyama 1999: 60).



Ethnographers should therefore be aware that differences in cultural knowledge could potentially be manifested as differences in sensory engagements with the world. Hence, within the Zulu weather-world, the winds were not confined to interact with the surface of the landscape but had the potential to blow through Thandi's body as they blew across and intermingled with the barren, rolling hills of KwaZulu-Natal. Her sensory engagements with these winds had the potential to be expressed through her open, 'enwinded' body. The winds that filled the nooks and crannies of the landscape, and the thatch of the huts with lively sounds carrying messages from their ancestral protectors and providers also interacted with Thandi's body. The haptic style that mediated the local relations to the weather-world laid the foundation for a sensorial engagement with the world where she experienced the winds of *umoya*, filling her body with the protective ancestral spirits in a time of dire needs. This separates Thandi's weather-world from the ontology that dominates most ethnographers in ways that begs for a closer investigation into her sensorial experiences with the weather-world.

Though the Greek terminology on wind and spirit at best was unstable and the interpretations numerous, *pneuma*, bridged the gap between body and soul as well as inner and outer winds (Lloyd 2007). Kuriyama (1999: 260) outlined how the discourses on *pneuma* in Greek medicine were altered over time. From denoting both 'spirit,' 'wind' and 'breath' in the Hippocratic tradition, thus linking the 'inner wind' directly to the meteorological phenomenon, *pneuma* was

transformed to almost exclusively refer to the internal winds—the soul—before it surfaced as the immaterial Holy Spirit in Christian theology (cf. Worsley 1997). With this relocation of the spirit, the porous, breathing body embedded in its surroundings disappeared and the boundaries around subject and object, material and immaterial, wind and spirit, hardened and changed. The body transpired during the Enlightenment as a separate and distinct object, not what people were, but something they related to (e.g. Harris, Robb, and Tarlow 2013: 172). As the spirit withdrew to an interior, private space through the age of reason, the weather-world was simultaneously demoted to an immaterial space where human actions unfold (Ingold 2011: ch. 9). European winds that used to be conceived as blowing through people, carrying “particles of air invading the pores of [the] skin” (Golinski 2007: 33), became through the seventeenth- and eighteenth century experientially and conceptually confined to blowing around the person (cf. Jankovic 2007: 158). Golinski’s study of weather diaries from the eighteenth century underscore that the diarists in general “did not present themselves as subject to the weather’s influence, but as detached and objective witnesses of it” (2007: 90).

I have suggested that the development of social theory has been hampered by this conjoined retreat of the air and spirit and the consequences it has had for our ability to theorize alternative sensory engagements with the weather-world. Faced with ethnographic accounts in which the wind is bodily present as described by Thandi,

we must as social scientists question our own sensory experiences of the world as part of a long social history that has opened but one of many possible affordances to the weather-world.

## CONCLUSION

The Zionists I knew sought healing on hilltops and beaches. These were places with characteristics that helped facilitate Thandi's oneiric encounters with the healing nocturnal winds. These ritual locations had one thing in common: The interactions between the landscape and the air was materialized in ways that shaped and transformed bodies through sensory experiences that tied weather, topography, ancestral spirits, and the bodies of the afflicted together as a unit. Thandi's experiences indicated that the winds of *umoya* were sensorially inseparable from the landscape and her body.

These experiences were strong enough to transform Thandi, and therefore need to be taken seriously in social theory. In this article I have argued that the social history of the body that dominates much of social theory has made us partially blind to the significance of ethnographic evidences of different sensory engagements with the weather-world. This makes it too easy to approach Thandi's testimony as dreams, a vivid imagination, or pathological sensory disturbances caused by her traumatic experiences. Instead I have used Ingold's phenomenological approach to the weather-world together with Kuriyama's historical investigation of different ways of sensing and

speaking of the body to argue that particular cultural and historical trajectories can be used in order to explore differences in the human capabilities to perceive and engage with the weather-world. In order to grasp Thandi's experiences with the winds, we need to tap into a rich, locally grounded ethnography that allows us to trace continuity and change in knowledge and the practices of movement in the weather-world. These trajectories in local body worlds contain an explanatory force that can be applied to help account for the structuring of the human senses, be it the reading of the pulse or engagements with air, winds, and the weather.

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