

1 Introduction

South Africans experienced 2004 and 2005, the years when I collected the bulk of information for this monograph, in very conflicted ways. A decade earlier former white supremacists and black freedom fighters had averted catastrophe by negotiating an end to racial conflict and establishing one of the most progressive constitutions on earth. Nelson Mandela had become the world's pre-eminent symbol of reconciliation. The country's constitution entrenched the right of freedom from discrimination on grounds of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. There was also growing confidence in South Africa's political system. The Independent Electoral Commission had supervised three successful elections and on each occasion the ruling ANC (African National Congress) had increased its majority. The international media touted South Africa's model of negotiation as a possible solution to seemingly insoluble crises elsewhere – in Israel, Sri Lanka, and the Sudan.

Tangible signs of 'development' abounded. Between 1994 and 2004, the country experienced sustained economic growth. The number of employed grew from 9.5 to 11.1 million; black directors of public companies increased from 14 (1 per cent) to 438 (13 per cent); the proportion of households with access to clean water rose from 60 to 85 per cent; and those getting electricity from 32 to 70 per cent. Six million citizens received housing, 1.8 million hectares of land had been transferred into black ownership, child-support grants were introduced, old-age pensions increased, and nutrition programmes reached 4.5 million school children (*The Sunday Independent*, 25 April 2004).

But another more disturbing side of South Africa's political transition was becoming apparent: one of unfulfilled promises and unmet expectations. In the wake of national reconciliation, South Africans began to experience the devastating effects of economic globalisation and de-industrialisation. Economists questioned government statistics about job creation. They pointed out that whilst the number of 'casual' workers had increased, there had been drastic job losses in the mining, manufacturing, and construction industries. Sources estimated that only 6.8 million of South Africa's economically active population of 15.5 million were 'formally' employed (Robinson 2004). Crime, domestic instability,

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violence, and HIV/AIDS emerged as issues of serious concern. In one survey, 23 per cent of all respondents indicated that they had been victims of crime (Leggett, Louw, Schönteich, and Sekhonyane 2003). In 1999 only 37 per cent of Africans in the 30 to 34 age group, and 51 per cent in the 35 to 39 age group, were married (Statistics South Africa 2000) and in 2002 fewer than 40 per cent of all African children under the age of 16 were reported as living with their fathers (Posel and Devey 2006: 38). Up to 48,000 rapes and 28,000 murders were reported to South African police annually (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; SAIRR 2002), and an estimated five million South Africans were infected with the deadly HI virus (Walker, Reid, and Cornell 2004). These figures were amongst the highest for any country in the world. Whilst few South Africans held government directly accountable for these woes, alienation was mounting amongst the electorate. During the 2004 elections 44 per cent of South Africa's 27.5 million eligible voters shied away from the polls, and another 250,000 voters spoil their ballots on purpose (*The Sunday Independent*, 18 April 2004).

Thus 2004 and 2005 were characterised by the paradoxical coexistence of enfranchisement and apathy, upward social mobility and unemployment, social welfare and increased mortality. Within this ambiguous context Ashforth (2005) discerns increased 'insecurity' and fears about 'witchcraft'. He contends that in Soweto,¹ South Africa's largest black township, the rapid rise of a black middle class, increased competition for jobs, declining fortunes of the poor, AIDS, the upsurge in crime, and dissipation of community solidarity have all contributed to increased distrust. Because misfortune can no longer credibly be explained with reference to the apartheid system as a form of structural evil, there has been a renewed emphasis on witchcraft. Ashforth claims that those who fail to achieve upward social mobility often see themselves as being held back by the malevolent powers of envious and jealous others. Many diviners reinforce and inflame these suspicions. In this social climate, witchcraft is nearly always a sub-text of what is spoken about kin and neighbours. Ashforth (2005) deploys the concept of 'spiritual insecurity' to capture the ethos of anxiety aroused by the indeterminacy of invisible forces, such as everyday threats of violence and of witchcraft.

Whereas Ashforth sticks to a strict division between an economy as empirical reality and spiritual beliefs and practices arising therefrom, Comaroff and Comaroff (1999a; 2000) transcend this division. They emphasise the perceived mystical basis of social inequality in post-apartheid South Africa, using the concept 'occult economies' to denote a situation in which individuals are imagined to deploy magical means

¹ Soweto is an acronym for Johannesburg's southwestern townships, and has a population of nearly two million people.

for material ends. They see these ‘economies’ in reports of elders who use witchcraft to abort the process of natural reproduction, businessmen who harvest human body parts to ensure good profits, and witches who conjure zombies as a vast army of ghost workers to fuel a vibrant immoral economy. These techniques are brutal forms of extraction, involving the destruction of others, but have the allure of making profits without ordinary production costs.² Comaroff and Comaroff contend that young men, for whom the promise of postcolonial prosperity is most obviously blocked, have taken it upon themselves to cleanse the country of witches and ritual murderers.

The aim of this monograph is to explore how the biography of one South African can inform our understanding of witchcraft in contemporary South Africa. I seek to tell the story of how one teacher, Jimmy Mohale, experienced the broader changes taking place in the country from 1964 to 2005, and came to interpret the misfortunes he encountered and his fatal illness as resulting from his father’s witchcraft.

As a biographical study, this monograph complements Ashforth’s lively *Madumo: a man bewitched* (1999), which focuses on a young man in Soweto who was accused of bewitching his own mother. The story tells how Madumo was robbed of his right to mourn her death, and was chased from home, having his blankets burnt. Madumo sees his experience of being labelled a witch as a sign that he himself is bewitched, and sets about to seek a cure by consulting a range of diviners and church-based healers. Though Madumo’s attempts to reconcile with his siblings fail dismally, he visits his father’s kin in a rural village near Mafikeng and hosts a feast for his paternal ancestors. When the ancestors are adjudged to be satisfied, Madumo is convinced that they are now behind him and that the witches have been defeated. He vows to stop smoking and drinking, to build a new home where his grandfather used to live, and to start selling second-hand clothes. Ashforth (1999) shows witchcraft accusations as arising from hostile struggles within the family, and from a reality of hatred that lies beneath the surface of togetherness.

Jimmy’s story differs from that of Madumo in two crucial respects. First, it is set in a rural context. It takes place largely in Impalahoek, a village in the Bushbuckridge area of the South African lowveld populated by about 20,000 Northern Sotho and Shangaan people. During the era of apartheid, Impalahoek formed part of the Northern Sotho Bantustan, Lebowa. After the country’s first democratic elections in

² Comaroff and Comaroff (1999b) describe zombies as an ‘army of spectral workers’, who, like immigrants from elsewhere on the continent, usurp scarce jobs from young people and prevent them from establishing families. Through being in ‘wandering exile’, zombies bear testimony to the rupture of connections between people and place. As tools that are stored in a shed, zombies also highlight the mounting confusion of people and things.

1994, Impalahoek was incorporated into the newly established province of Limpopo, and then transferred to Mpumalanga Province in 2006. Second, whereas Madumo was unemployed and seen as draining household resources, Jimmy was an aspirant member of South Africa's new middle class. He was a brilliant pupil, obtained a Bachelor of Education degree, became a gifted teacher, married another professional, fathered three healthy children, and was an executive member of the local ANC branch. The misfortunes Jimmy attributed to witchcraft were therefore more unexpected, and more intimately related to his perception that something was subverting his life chances and preventing him from realising the middle-class life course he deserved.

Theoretical Concerns

The monograph focuses on Jimmy Mohale's narratives and recollections of very concrete experiences. But there are nonetheless a number of more abstract theoretical concerns that shape my understanding of the material. I adopt a 'pragmatic' approach, which seeks to understand the constitutive place of individuals and of events in social processes. Logically, this approach aims to transcend the oppositions between the abstract social system and the individual agent, and between history and event. It treats fieldwork as a matter of engaging and interpreting lived social worlds, rather than mapping out the nature of social systems (Ortner 1984; 1996; 2006; Hastrup 1995; 2005). I seek to narrate the interrelatedness of social contexts, historical processes, events, personal dispositions and states of mind. In so doing I aim to transcend the limitations of a purely interpretive and relativist approach, and I ask uncomfortable questions about anthropological interventions in times of fatal illness.

A foremost concern is to investigate the relationship between witchcraft beliefs and accusations, and the contexts in which they occur. In this respect, I see as untenable any strong formulation of Ashforth's (1999; 2005) and Comaroff and Comaroff's (1999a; 2000) arguments, which treat the proliferation of discourses about witchcraft as a 'response' to the ambiguities of the post-apartheid situation. At a seminar at the University of Chicago, during 2002, Sahlins made a telling criticism of the theory that witchcraft accusations are an index of political and economic inequalities. He pointed out that no witchcraft accusations are made in Polynesia, despite the salience of rank and hierarchy that prevails in that part of the world. Witchcraft, he suggested, has more to do with cosmology (personal communication).

Likewise, West (2007) argues that discourses about sorcery do not symbolise other realities. Muedan people in Mozambique were adamant that sorcery is not a metaphor of abstract things such as social predation. They insisted that sorcery is real! West (2007) contends that it makes

greater sense to adopt a phenomenological approach, which engages with the Muedan world of sorcery from a particular space within it. This approach compels us to view sorcery practices as actual exercises in constructing, rather than merely representing, social realities. For him the reality of sorcery is built up through language and discourse, and is experienced through verbal constructs such as threats and accusations. 'People do not speak of sorcery: they actually speak sorcery' (West 2007: 53). As Muedans imagine sorcery, they experience their imaginings as real. In this conception, symbols stand for themselves and are an essential part of the world of which they speak. Hence sorcery or indeed witchcraft is an ever-present language, discourse, or sub-text in social encounters.

These critical interventions compel us to recognise a more complex relationship between beliefs and their contexts. Moreover, Ranger (2007) argues that the notion of occult economies wrongly aggregates different sorts of data, and does not connect the present to the past in any meaningfully documented way.³ Evidence suggests that the post-apartheid context does not present a decisive rupture from earlier cosmologies. Witchcraft has a long historical presence in north-eastern South Africa, a presence that precedes the tumultuous events of the twentieth century (Delius 2001). It has been constantly reconfigured through time, outliving the institutions supporting it, and surviving to confront new situations of life (McCaskie 2000).

One can make a far more persuasive case for a somewhat weaker, less deterministic, formulation of the ideas of Ashforth (2005) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1999a; 2002). In the absence of accurate historical information, this formulation makes no assumptions about increased fears of malevolent mystical forces. I simply treat the sorts of frustrated expectations, social relations, and misfortunes encountered in contemporary South Africa as one possible context for witchcraft beliefs. As a cosmology, discourse, or language, witchcraft is never insular and inward-looking. Apologists of former apartheid policies, and also some proponents of African nationalism, mistakenly see witchcraft as a unique expression of African culture(s). But very similar beliefs are widespread in many non-African contexts.⁴ Moreover, discourses of witchcraft are extremely open-ended, constantly allow for the incorporation of new

³ Ranger's (2007) suggestions have sparked widespread scholarly debate. Ter Haar and Ellis (2009) advocate that we should discard the notion of the 'occult' altogether, and seek to understand phenomena such as witchcraft in the framework of 'religion' as a more neutral encompassing term. Meyer (2009) defends the theory of 'occult economies', suggesting that it might well be employed for the sake of detailed research. My sympathy in this debate lies with Ranger. His understanding of context incorporates a focus on the intersections between mystical beliefs and social domains, and also between local and trans-local forces. Unlike his critics, Ranger does not specify these contexts a priori.

⁴ Witchcraft beliefs are encountered in contemporary France (Favret-Saada 1980), Russia (Worobec 1995), and India (Bailey 1998).

themes, and often link local realities to global forces. This capacity makes discourses of witchcraft eminently suitable for interpreting contemporary changes (Ardener 1970; Auslander 1993; Geschiere 1997; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Moore and Sanders 2001; Green and Mesaki 2005).

At the same time, culture is not free-floating or autonomous. It seldom offers an adequate explanatory framework by itself (Kuper 1999). Classical theorists such as Evans-Pritchard (1937) and Marwick (1965) contended that Azande and Chewa only invoked witchcraft in certain situations. Witchcraft is not an epiphenomenon of other realities; it is essentially a discourse *about* things such as misfortune, profound social tensions, and grave interpersonal conflict (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 63–83).

A biography has all the drawbacks of a one-person survey, but it also offers new analytical insights. In my earlier monograph I ventured to suggest that witchcraft beliefs in Bushbuckridge have less to do with African identity than with people's unfortunate experiences in an overcrowded former Bantustan area (Niehaus 2001). In a provocative paper, Caplan (2004) questions my formulation. She draws an ambitious comparison between witchcraft in Africa and the imagery that informs the so-called 'war on terror' in the United States and United Kingdom. In both instances, she argues, those blamed for evil are excluded from the moral community and punished. This observation leads her to question whether 'marginalisation, misery, poverty and insecurity' are always the real issues, especially in the case of affluent Western countries. Caplan (2004) might well underestimate the different issues involved. But in reading her argument, I also realised how unsuited any conventional ethnographic monograph is to explore the conjunctions between misfortune and witchcraft. A biography is arguably a better vehicle for such an exploration.

The biographical narrative is credited for its syncretism and capacity to illuminate the interplay between the social, historical, and personal (Mills 1975; Ferrarotti 1981). It can show the influences of diverse discourses on people's lives and beliefs, and can reveal the discrepancy between conceptual models and concrete behaviour (Niehaus 2006a). A biography can also capture 'hidden historical processes' (van Onselen 1993). This diachronic temporality offers a more appropriate vantage point than conventional ethnographies for exploring how witchcraft is invoked to explain recurrent misfortune. Favret-Saada (1989) contends that farmers in the Brocage area of rural France only ask whether anyone wishes them ill when their farms become caught in a state of permanent crisis.

The misfortunes that occur repeatedly and without reason on the farms are called 'spells'; animals and people become sterile, fall ill or die, cows abort or lose their milk, plantations rot or dry, buildings burn or collapse, machines break down, and sales drop drastically. (Favret-Saada 1989: 42)

In other words, we cannot explain witchcraft beliefs purely in terms of their systemic agency – that is, as the intended and patterned outcome of social processes and structures. This view excludes the possibility of unintended and unanticipated events – such as the sorts of misfortune that find expression in witchcraft – that are products of conjunctive agency (Sahlins 2004: 155). Whereas systemic agency calls for conventional social analysis, conjunctive agency exhibits an ‘evential’ history that we can best capture through the narrative of storytelling (ibid: 157).⁵ In other words, we can do so by mapping out the life course of specific persons through time.

A second, related, concern is to investigate the domestic contexts of witchcraft. This focus does not detract from my concern with broader political and economic processes. Cole and Durham (2007) observe that broader transformations provide new contexts for social reproduction and for intimate domestic relations. But reciprocally, they contend, practices associated with domestic relations mediate large-scale processes. Global processes, they assert, do not take place ‘out there’, but in decisions about specific relationships. A biography also offers an appropriate device for exploring the quality of social relationships as ‘core sociological objects’ (Bertaux 1981). I suggest that, in the post-apartheid era, witchcraft accusations have become increasingly private, and that witches have become increasingly masculine. These shifts may be partially due to the suppression of public witch-hunts by South Africa’s ANC government, intent on pursuing a political modernist agenda (Niehaus 2010a). Significantly greater numbers of male cognates, such as fathers, are now identified as witches. I view this trend in the light of local experiences of de-industrialisation, which have made the status of the father extremely ambiguous. Discourses of social progress construct sons as improved versions of their fathers. Yet actual experiences of social and economic marginalisation of men in the new era contradict the subject positions that these discourses provide. Fathers, paradoxically, have achieved greater authority than their sons.

Impalahoek: The Reconfiguration of Witchcraft

I start with an account of the historical trajectory of witchcraft beliefs in the area presently known as Bushbuckridge, to provide the backdrop against which Jimmy’s life story can be understood. It draws on archival records of South Africa’s former Native Affairs Department, previously

⁵ Malkki (1997) points to the conceptual distinction between repetitive, persistent, and normative cultural patterns as the domain of anthropologists; and transitory, non-repetitive, and anomalous news events as the domain of journalists. She questions the merits of this separation and suggests that anthropologists can learn a great deal from carefully considering the latter kind of phenomena.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01628-6 - Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa

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Excerpt

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published historical studies, and oral traditions and historical recollections gained from interviews with elderly village residents.

The earliest oral traditions refer to indigenous wars and to the migration of diverse Northern Sotho (Bakone, Baroka, Pulana) and Tsonga-speaking groups (Banwalungu, Hlanganu, Nxumalo) into the lowveld since the mid-nineteenth century. For example, the followers of the Pulana chief, Maripe, were said to have bewitched the Swazi invaders of Bushbuckridge, in the well-known battle of Mount Moholoholo in 1864 (Ziervogel 1954). Descendants of the spy, Malalathuleng Moekoena, proudly told me how their ancestor confronted a Swazi regiment by himself, became invisible, and laid a herbal compound called *sefolo* on the ground to cripple them. Malalathuleng also blew a pipe, made from the arm-bone of a deceased soldier, to make the enemy Swazi warriors tremble.⁶

The context of these beliefs changed as encroachment by whites altered the conditions under which Africans held land. In the late 1880s President Kruger's republican government surveyed and sold large tracts of land in the lowveld to speculators and mining companies. Kruger's government also granted former Afrikaner tenants 'occupation farms' in exchange for military service (Harries 1989: 91). The new landlords compelled Africans resident on their land to pay rent in labour, cash, and kind. After the South African War (1899–1902) the price of land rose and there was a transition from stock to arable farming, creating an acute labour shortage (Harries 1989: 93). The 1913 Native Land Act prohibited Africans from owning land outside defined Native Reserves, and thereby imposed a system of labour tenancy on the white-owned farms. The household head, or his sons, now worked for the white landlord for a period of three months each year, without remuneration. For the remainder of the year they cultivated their own fields and tended their own cattle (Harries 1989: 94).

The Land Act scheduled a number of farms for exclusive African occupation, but left intact a system of rent tenancy, whereby residents of the farms paid annual taxes to the African and European Investment Company, for residential, cultivation, and stock-keeping rights.⁷ The settlement pattern was one of scattered hamlets (*metse*) comprising the homesteads, fields, gardens, and ancestral graves of co-resident agnatic clusters. During the early 1930s fields were still as large as a hamlet could cultivate and no stock limitations were imposed. Larger hamlets

⁶ Delius (2001) argues that published and unpublished records of the Berlin Missionary Society suggest that beliefs in witchcraft and in 'zombies' were extremely pervasive in nineteenth-century Transvaal. However, at the same time, the missionary records show that the incidence of individuals being openly accused of, or punished for, witchcraft was low, and that large-scale and lethal witch-hunts were extremely rare.

⁷ Valuation Lands Department, 25 October 1937, LDE 115/30, V 2328.

could harvest up to 90 bags of maize plus 30 bags of sorghum, and keep herds in excess of 150 cattle. By selling produce and stock to traders, hamlets could afford to pay rent. Men also worked intermittently at the Sabie forestry plantations or Pilgrim's Rest gold mines to obtain cash for clothes and other commodities (Niehaus 2001: 20).

However, with the creation of the Kruger National Park (a famous game reserve), the forestation of large tracts of land on Mount Moholoholo, and the expulsion of former rent tenants from the white-owned farms, numerous displaced households moved onto the company farms. This placed great strain on rural resources. By 1937 vast amounts of land had already been cleared, and in 1937, 1939, and 1941 plagues of locusts, commando worm, and drought regularly made agriculture a hazardous enterprise.⁸ Faced with this crisis, large numbers of men signed contracts to work on the Witwatersrand.

In 1948, the year that apartheid became official government policy, the South African Native Trust purchased all company farms. Impalahoek now became part of the Bushbuckridge Native Reserve, administered by a white Assistant Native Commissioner (Niehaus 2001: 21). Impalahoek again served as a reception site for hundreds of households, displaced by the mechanisation of production operations on the surrounding white-owned farms (Harries 1989: 104). Having failed to acquire more land to accommodate the influx of additional households, the Native Affairs Department was compelled to alter the utilisation of land within the Reserve. Between 1952 and 1953 field officers demarcated three residential areas and several clearly defined arable areas. Whereas households had previously been allocated an average of 2.5 hectares of land, they were now allocated only 0.8 hectares for agriculture. Few households could produce more than six bags of maize on their reduced fields.⁹ Moreover, in 1951 a foot-and-mouth epizootic decimated people's cattle herds.

Within Bushbuckridge, the term 'witch' (*moloi*, pl. *baloi*) came to denote a broad conceptual category. It referred to persons who inherited mystical malevolent power from their mothers, and also to those who deliberately set out to acquire harmful substances and skills. Witchcraft (*loya*) encompassed the diverse activities of poisoning, the use of potions (called *dihlare*), and also the deployment of familiars and of zombies. Women witches were said to skilfully use the lethal crocodile brain and

⁸ Burns (2000: 14–19) writes that a food crisis and severe starvation prevailed in Bushbuckridge at the time of the Second World War. Whilst local people were unable to reap crops, the Maize Control Board was compelled by government to impose wartime restrictions and issued insufficient rations of maize and even seeds to sell in the general dealer stores. People fainted from hunger, and in a stampede by anxious buyers at a store a child was trampled to death.

⁹ Reclamation and Resettlement Report, Native Affairs Department, Bushbuckridge 1957, NTS 17/423/1, V10226.

‘slow poison’ (*sejeso*). Once ingested, the former caused stomach cramps and headaches, and would eventually crack the victim’s brain. The latter transformed into a reptile such as a frog, lizard, or snake that devoured the victim’s body from inside.

Witches allegedly manufactured *dihlare* from herbs, roots, animal fats, and human bodily substances.¹⁰ A potion called *sefolane* was placed on footpaths, entered the body through the soles of the feet, and caused paralysis of the legs. Another, *go kotola*, made from the victim’s own nails, urine, faeces, hair, or footprints, was used to influence his or her behaviour. *Šibeka*, made from human blood, drove away rain-bearing clouds. Other kinds of potions caused friends to fight, cattle to trample their owners, and lightning to strike people’s homes.

My informants readily associated witches with familiars (*dithuri*) and zombies (*dilotlwane*). They alleged that witches sent their familiars – usually snakes, owls, hyenas, baboons, cats, and even lions – to attack and kill their victims. Witches allegedly changed their victims into zombies, by first capturing their aura or shadow (*seriti*) and then progressively taking hold of different parts of their bodies, until they possessed the entire person. But witches would deceive the victim’s kin by leaving an image of him or her behind. The kin would believe that the victim was dead, but in reality they had buried the stem of a fern tree transformed into the victim’s image by the witch. At home witches employed their zombies as servants to do domestic work, herd cattle, and cultivate fields. Hence, my informants conceptualised zombie-making as ‘theft of persons’ (Niehaus 2005a). The travails of zombies resonated with the actual experiences of young wives who left their natal hamlets for the unfamiliar ones of their affines, where they lived and worked under the constant surveillance of their mothers-in-law.

Drawing on the memories of informants I recorded 27 witchcraft accusations that occurred before 1960. In all cases witchcraft was said to have been motivated by feelings of envy, greed, and resentment. Thirteen accusations occurred between neighbours, ten between affines, and four between cognates. They took place in the contexts of unequal harvests, tensions between women and their daughters-in-law over domestic work, and disputes concerning the inheritance of cattle.

¹⁰ The Northern Sotho word *dihlare* (sing. *sehlare*) is the equivalent of *murhi* in Tsonga and *muti* or *muthi* in the Nguni languages. These words all derive from the root ‘tree’. It refers to any compound made by expert hand from mixtures of roots, leaves, barks, animal products, and even industrial chemicals. These substances are believed to have inherent agency. There are no limits to the uses of *dihlare* other than the skills or power of the persons making or using it. It can be used for healing, cleansing, strengthening, and protection: for the negative ends of witchcraft, bringing illness, misfortune, and death to others; or for gaining wealth and power at other people’s expense. *Dihlare* also plays a part in communications between humans and spirits (Ashforth 2005: 41–4, 133–7).