Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa

Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa reconstructs the biography of an ordinary South African, Jimmy Mohale. Born in 1964, Jimmy came of age in rural South Africa during apartheid, then studied at university and worked as a teacher during the anti-apartheid struggle. In 2005, Jimmy died from an undiagnosed sickness, probably related to AIDS. Jimmy gradually came to see the unanticipated misfortune he experienced as a result of his father's witchcraft and sought remedies from diviners rather than from biomedical doctors. This study casts new light on scholarly understandings of the connections between South African politics, witchcraft, and the AIDS pandemic.

Isak Niehaus is currently Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Brunel University. He is the author of *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (2001) and *Magic! AIDS Review 2009* (2010) with Fraser G. McNeill. He is a member of the council of the Royal Anthropological Institute and has done extensive fieldwork in South African rural areas.

‘Over its career religion has probably disturbed men as much as it has cheered them, forced them into a head-on, unblinking confrontation of the fact that they are born to trouble as often as it enabled them to avoid such a confrontation. . . .’

(Geertz 1973a: 103)

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Contents

List of Maps and Figures

Notes on Currency

Prices are expressed in pound sterling (£) until 1961, when the Union of South Africa became a Republic, and in South African rand (R) thereafter. The exchange rate has fluctuated throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In 2004 the exchange rate was approximately £ = R12.50 and US$1 = R7.00.

Central Characters

Jimmy Mohale. The biographical subject is a 41-year-old teacher and occasional ethnographic research assistant. He holds B.Ed and BA (Honours) degrees from the University of Limpopo. Jimmy is medium-built and serious, though he has an excellent sense of humour.

Luckson Mohale. Jimmy's father (71) is a retired truck driver with wide experience working in different South African cities. Although excitable and quickly angered, Luckson is usually an extroverted, warm, and talkative person. Luckson is exceptionally neat, knowledgeable about politics and tradition, and fairly similar to Jimmy in appearance. He always spoke to me in Afrikaans. We never discussed the topic of witchcraft.

Ngwa (née) **Ngobeni (Selina Mohale).** Jimmy's mother (about 68) is usually found selling fruit and vegetables at the Impalahoek market, near her home. She is a fairly stout woman, who loves her seven children with all her heart. Though emotional, she is soft-spoken, and renowned for extreme kindness. She has begun to suffer from respiratory problems in her old age.

Ngwa **Usinga.** Luckson Mohale's second wife and Jimmy's younger mother (about 62). She is the mother of six children and has frequently experienced tension and strife with her co-wife in the past.

Moses Mohale. Jimmy's oldest sibling (49) is well-built, taller than Jimmy, and closely resembles his father. Though not well educated, Moses is decisive, somewhat intense, and serious. Like his father, he usually works as a truck driver in Johannesburg.

Ngwa **Mohale (Jessie Thobela)** (46) is Jimmy's only sister. Like her mother, she works as a fruit and vegetable vendor. Jessie is soft-spoken and introverted, and has given birth to eight children.

Peter Mohale (37), Jimmy's brother, is a staunch member of the Zion Christian Church. Twice married, he works in Johannesburg, and is very seldom at home.

Henry Mohale. Though Jimmy's younger sibling (30), he is often treated as senior because he is named after his paternal grandfather. Henry is highly intelligent and hard-working. He holds BA and MA degrees in Information Studies, and works as a subject librarian at the University of Limpopo. Though a father, Henry is single. Of all the Mohale siblings, he was the least willing to believe that his father practised witchcraft.

Kagišo Mohale (27) is Jimmy's youngest sibling. Though he wishes to work as a policeman, Kagišo has been consistently unemployed since leaving school. He is tall, slender, and athletic. He was one of the first to suspect his father of witchcraft.

Kevin Mohale, Jimmy's younger sibling, died in 1984, shortly after he returned from initiation, at the tender age of thirteen. Though I never met Kevin, his death shook the Mohale family, and memories of Kevin were very much present in everyday discourse.

***Ngwa* Mashile (Lerato Mohale)** (39) is Jimmy's wife and mother of his three children. She is considerably taller than Jimmy, and suffers from asthma. A Zionist, she holds a PTC (primary teacher's certificate) and teaches in a local primary school. Though set in her ways, she is fairly introverted and soft-spoken. Separated from Jimmy after consistent quarrels over money and extramarital affairs, she is a caring and conscientious parent.

Kgopotšo Mohale (17), **Thandi Mohale** (15), and **Katlego Mohale** (5) are Jimmy and Lerato's children, who were attending school during the time of the events written about in this biography.

Andrew Mohale (34) was Jimmy's half-brother and one of the first to accuse their father of witchcraft. He was unemployed, separated from his wife, and renowned for smoking cannabis and for heavy drinking. Andrew was said to have died of AIDS-related diseases during 2005.

Iris Maluleke. As Jimmy's most important extramarital lover (27), she is widely blamed for destroying his family. From a poverty-stricken family, Iris is extremely attractive, and occasionally works as a hairdresser. She is known as being very assertive.

Duduzile Thobela (12) and **Rebecca Mohale** (27) are Jimmy's nieces. As Jessie's daughter, Duduzile was an industrious primary school pupil who died from a mysterious respiratory condition. Rebecca, who was Moses's daughter, worked as a chef at a holiday resort. She died, probably from AIDS-related diseases, in 2005. Relatives attributed their deaths to witchcraft.

***Ngwa* Chiloane (Nana Mohale)**, Luckson's mother, was also suspected of practising witchcraft. She lived in Luckson's home, and, despite her love for her son, was renowned for a quarrelsome nature and the dislike she expressed towards members of the Shangaan-speaking community.

Patrick Monna (35) and **Ace Ubisi** (39) are Jimmy's neighbours, friends, and occasional drinking mates. Patrick is a single mineworker of small stature, and Ace is a former security guard and first-division football player. Ace works as a photographer and occasional ethnographic research assistant. He is twice divorced and otherwise unemployed. Like Jimmy, both men have an excellent sense of humour.

***Ngwa* Mohale (Doris Mosoma)** (about 59 when she died in 1986), **Aaron Mohale** (about 74), and ***ngwa* Mohale (Basebele Mashile)** (about 65 when she died in 2001) are Luckson's siblings. Doris was accused of witchcraft and brutally executed by ANC Comrades in 1986. Aaron and Basebele both accused Luckson of witchcraft, and of being responsible for the multiple deaths in their families.

Isak (Sakkie) Niehaus (44), the author, a social anthropologist, has been doing ethnographic fieldwork in Bushbuckridge since 1990. Of Cape Afrikaans descent, he has taught at the Universities of Witwatersrand and Pretoria in South Africa, and currently works at Brunel University in the United Kingdom.

Preface

In 1990 I first started doing ethnographic research in Impalahoek[1] – a village of the South African lowveld populated by approximately 20,000 Northern Sotho and Tsonga speakers. At the time Impalahoek seemed to be on the brink of revolutionary change. Comrades (young political activists associated with the African National Congress) had rendered Lebowa – the Northern Sotho 'Bantustan' of apartheid South Africa – effectively ungovernable. A few years previously, Comrades had accused a number of elders of witchcraft and violently executed them. At the time there were ongoing battles between the youth and an organisation of adults called the Sofasonke ('We Die Together') Civic Union, which had resulted in three brutal murders.

As a white anthropologist, I soon realised the need to hire research assistants. I desperately required local helpers to steer me through the minefield of tumultuous and tense political situations. My research was also hampered by my poor command of the local languages – Northern Sotho and Tsonga. With this aim in mind I approached a teacher, Macbeth Shai, but he was unable to help me because he coached soccer each afternoon. Macbeth, a good judge of character, introduced me to some of his colleagues whom he said would make able assistants. I became great friends with many of those to whom he introduced me, and with them I formed the most productive working relationships of my professional career. I managed to complete 30 months of fieldwork that formed the basis of a monograph on witchcraft and political processes, and also a host of articles on topics such as dances, ethnicity, masculinity, politics, sexuality, taboos, and violence.

Throughout my fieldwork I involved my assistants as co-researchers rather than as mere guides, interpreters, and research subjects. They assisted me in identifying research problems, selecting informants, doing participant observation, and also in interpreting information. The last task often provoked fierce debates. Since I held full-time teaching positions throughout the period of my fieldwork, I could not secure prolonged

[1] The name of this village and of all persons in this monograph are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise specified all non-English terms are in Northern Sotho.

research leave. Instead of the conventional year in the field, I became a migrant, oscillating between the cities where I taught during term time, and Impalahoek, where I conducted research over vacations. Some of the most important tasks of my assistants were noting the details and dates of important events that happened in my absence.

I used several research assistants and sustained very different relationships with each of them. Jimmy Mohale, a teacher who was 27 years old in 1990, was one assistant whom I soon came to regard as my closest colleague and friend. Whereas some of my other assistants were better mentors and were more readily available for fieldwork, I tended to interact more easily with Jimmy on a social level. Jimmy and I both loved drinking beer, talking about history, cooking exotic dishes, and watching films. He regularly visited me at my homes in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Pretoria. In Cape Town, Jimmy and my mother drew much attention when they scooped up ice-cold seawater in large plastic Coca-Cola bottles at Bloubergstrand. The water was later to be used for healing rituals in Impalahoek. As a fieldwork interlocutor, Jimmy increasingly occupied the role of a coeval, much as Al Muhammed had during Rabinow's Moroccan fieldwork (Rabinow 1977). The end of apartheid came in 1994, and friendships between white and black men were then easier and more commonplace than they had been in the past.

In 2002, Jimmy abruptly ceased working with me. There was never any overt argument between us, but I found it virtually impossible to locate him in the afternoons after school, or even on weekends. On the few occasions that I did meet him, he always offered some excuse. He either desperately had to go somewhere, or urgently had to attend to some family matter. I gained the impression that Jimmy purposefully avoided me: that he was no longer prepared to work for the small daily stipend I paid, or to continue assuming the subservient and stressful position of being a research assistant, described so aptly by van Binsbergen (2003: 51–74). However, Jimmy's kin and other friends told me a different story. Far from being too proud to work as a research assistant, they said that Jimmy was in a great predicament and was ashamed. He had deserted his wife and three children for a much younger woman, drank heavily, and became extremely short-tempered – even with the best of friends. Moreover, I learnt from Jimmy's brother that he now openly accused his own father of witchcraft, and that he had even gone so far as to consult diviners to kill the old man with vengeance magic (*letšwa*).

Perhaps Jimmy's strategy of avoiding me was wise. Through time I had become exceptionally fond of his children, was furious about what he had done to them, and openly sympathized with his wife. I also respected Jimmy's father, who had always treated me very courteously and kindly.

Jimmy was correct to assume that, despite his earnest attempts to educate me about witchcraft, I did not share his beliefs about his father's hidden malevolence.

As my anger receded, I began to fear that I might lose a friendship that still meant a great deal to me. I was therefore extremely happy, early in 2004, when Jimmy approached me and two other friends, as we were eating lunch and reading newspapers in my car, parked underneath the shade of a large tree. Jimmy greeted us, joined in, and began talking to us on the topic of local names that we were investigating at that time. A few months later he accompanied me to Pretoria and spent a pleasant week at my home. Jimmy now realised that I had already heard of his divorce and of his assertions about his father's witchcraft, but that I had not learnt about their details. Believing that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, he vowed to tell me the full story of the events that had transpired in his life. His telling took the form of a biographical narrative told with enormous honesty and great narrative skill during the course of 21 sessions at my home in Pretoria, my small rondavel (round thatch-roofed house) at the Wits Rural Facility,[2] and at his home in Impalahoek.

On 11 June 2005, whilst we were still recording his biography, Jimmy unexpectedly suffered a serious attack of pneumonia. To Jimmy it was obvious that his sickness was the result of his father's witchcraft, and he consulted a range of diviners and Christian healers in his quest for a cure. He only once consulted a general practitioner. I suspected that Jimmy's sickness might well be AIDS-related, pleaded with him that he go to the hospital, and gave him money for this purpose. But Jimmy argued that biomedical practitioners cannot cure witchcraft, and proceeded to visit yet more diviners and Christian healers. His condition rapidly deteriorated, but he still defiantly refused biomedical treatment. I drove to Bushbuckridge to see Jimmy on the first weekend of September 2005, and was shocked to see how much weight he had lost and how shallow his breathing had become. I asked Jimmy whether there was anything that I could do for him. He suspected that I wanted to take him to the Nelspruit Mediclinic, and commanded me not to become involved in managing his sickness, but rather to complete his biography. On Friday 16 September, Jimmy's brother, Henry Mohale, phoned my office in Pretoria to tell me that Jimmy had died in the Mankweng Hospital outside Polokwane, at five o'clock the previous morning.

Even before then, I had realised that Jimmy's experiences could offer genuinely new insight into witchcraft beliefs in the contexts of South

[2] The Wits Rural Facility is operated by the University of the Witwatersrand and is used to accommodate researchers and to expose students to the realities of rural South Africa. It is located a few kilometers outside Impalahoek.

Africa's turbulent political transition from apartheid to democracy and the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa* is my attempt to tell this story to a broader scholarly community. His tragic death and his insistence that I record his last struggles added another crucial dimension to his biography.

Two very different influences have shaped the manner in which I wrote this biography – namely those represented by Charles van Onselen and by the late David Hammond-Tooke. I was extremely fortunate to work at the same universities as Charles, and I learnt enormously from his life stories of lesser known persons such as Nongoloza Mathebula, Kas Maine, and Joseph Silver (van Onselen 1984, 1996, and 2007). The doors of his office always stood open for me. As my former head of department at the University of the Witwatersrand, David's writings on cosmology and symbolism in Southern Africa added a crucial dimension to my understanding of historical processes and human experience. His monograph, *Boundaries and Belief: The Structure of a Sotho Worldview* (1981), was written especially for someone with my interests in mind. I hope that my eclectic use of their analytical insights does justice to them.

Other colleagues have also been extremely helpful – sometimes in less obvious ways. They include my numerous friends and research participants in Bushbuckridge, of whom I shall name only Kevin Mitchell, Eliazaar Mohlala, Sharon Pollard, and Eric Thobela; Nicolas Argenti, Harri Englund, Deborah James, Stephanie Kitchen, Adam Kuper, Patrick Pearson, and James Staples (in the United Kingdom, where I am based at the moment); Mary Crewe, Rehana Ebrahim-Vally, Anthony Goedhals, Zendré Lategan, Fraser McNeill, Jimmy Pieterse, John Sharp, Enos Sikhauli, and Natalie Swanepoel (in Pretoria); David Coplan, Conny Mathebula, Jonathan Stadler, and Robert Thornton (across the Jukskei River in Johannesburg); Susan Cook (Rustenburg); Leslie Bank (East London); Sven Ouzman and Ilana Van Wyk (Cape Town); Jens Andersson (Harare); Fred Golooba-Mutembi (Kampala); Nico Besnier and Peter Geschiere (Amsterdam); Erik Bähre (Leiden); Giorgia Tresca (Rome); Aleksandar Boskovic (Belgrade); Petr Skalnik (Prague); Don Handelman (Jerusalem); Adam Ashforth (Michigan); Graeme Reid, Hal Scheffler, and Jan Simpson (New Haven); Peta Katz (Charlotte, North Carolina); and Eirik Saethre (Hawaii). I especially wish to thank Florence Bernault (Wisconsin) for her support and guidance during the final stages of preparing this manuscript.

The fieldwork upon which this study is based was partly financed by extremely generous research grants by the Mellon Mentorship Programme, administered by the University of Pretoria. Despite my rather eccentric career choice, my parents, Anita and Hennie Niehaus, have always encouraged me in pursuing my endeavours. My mother has often

asked me 'How is Jimmy doing these days?' I hope this biography provides an answer to some of her questions, at the same time as generating empathy for his adversities, conundrums, and choices (right and wrong) in social situations that were seldom of his own making.

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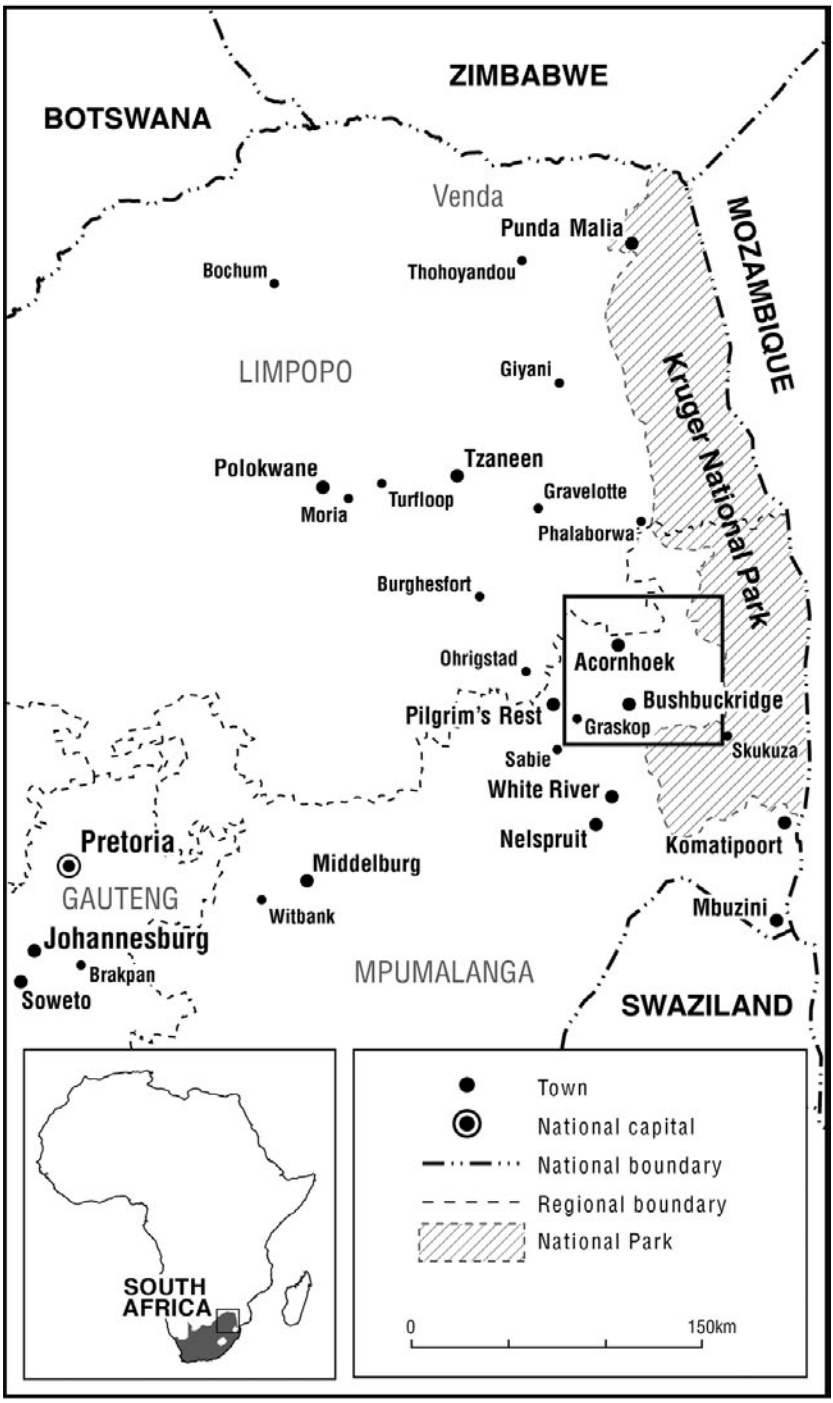
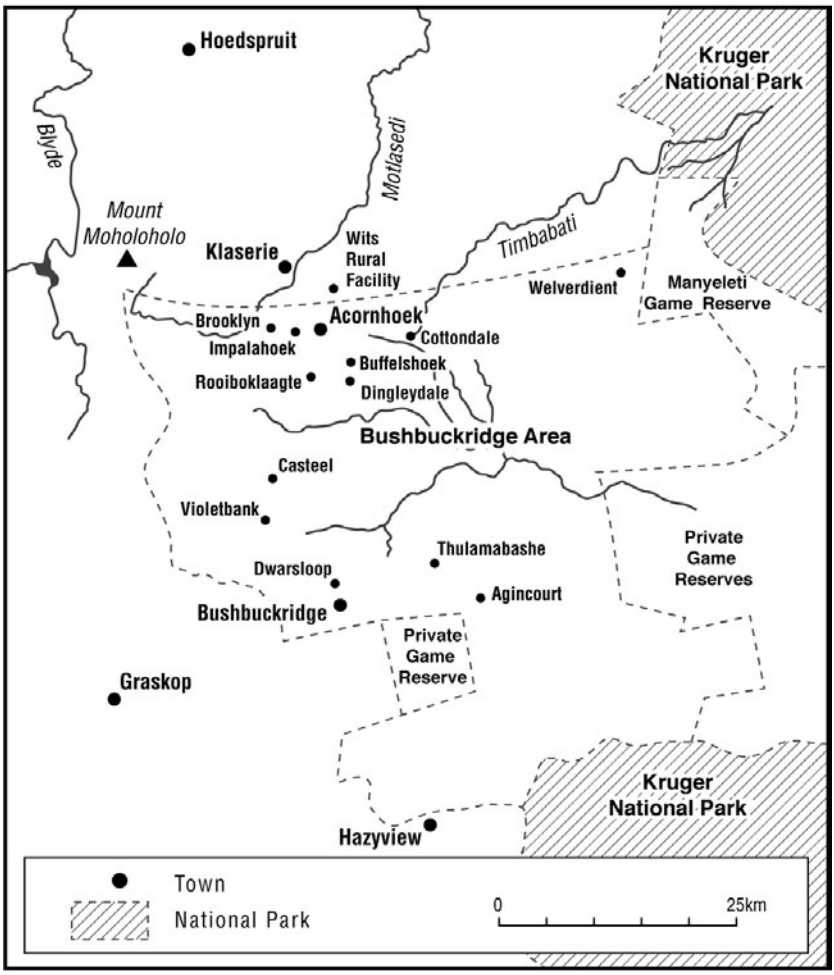


Map 1. North-eastern South Africa



Map 2. Bushbuckridge region, South Africa