Abstract
On the basis of field research in Soweto, South Africa, since 1990, this paper reports that witchcraft is commonly thought to be increasing as a direct result of the transition to democracy. This paper begins an examination of the question of witchcraft, violence, and democracy in Soweto by presenting three dialogues on witchcraft and the state: with a man afflicted by witchcraft, a traditional healer, and the mayor of Soweto. Its aim is to uncovered the structure of plausibility within which questions concerning the purpose of power in a democratic state are being framed and answered in a context where witches are a vital and terrifying feature of everyday life.

Résumé
Sorcellerie, violence et démocratie dans la Nouvelle Afrique du Sud. — À partir d'enquêtes de terrain réalisées à Soweto, en Afrique du Sud, depuis 1990, cet article entend souligner le fait que la pratique de la sorcellerie se développe au fur et à mesure que se met en place le processus de transition démocratique. L'auteur confronte les problèmes de sorcellerie, de violence et de démocratie qui se posent à Soweto ; puis il présente trois dialogues faisant état des relations entre la sorcellerie et l'État : un dialogue avec un homme ensorcelé, un avec un guérisseur traditionnel, et un autre avec le maire de Soweto. Le but de cet article est d'examiner la structure argumentative à l'intérieur de laquelle les questions concernant la nature du pouvoir dans un État démocratique sont énoncées et débattues, ceci dans un contexte où les sorciers représentent un aspect à la fois vital et terrifiant de la vie quotidienne.
Adam Ashforth

Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in the New South Africa*

Witchcraft, broadly conceived as the capacity to cause harm or accumulate illicit wealth and power by supernatural means, is a central feature of African life in South Africa. Since the first democratic elections in that country in 1994, witchcraft is commonly thought to be rapidly increasing. Witchcraft is not currently on the political agenda as the South African state is being remade in the image of a modern liberal democracy. In local African communities, however, it ramifies into every aspect of that agenda. For witchcraft is a central aspect of the insecurity of everyday life and a great deal of time, energy, and money is spent combating its dreaded effects. Moreover, witches are typically understood to be engaged in a form of action akin to violence in the bringing of harm to innocent citizens—perpetrators of a form of crime and a threat to the community as a whole. People are beginning to ask: What is the Government doing about witches? This paper begins a discussion of the ways in which questions about witchcraft and the state are being discussed in local communities in Soweto.

South Africa is now governed as a modern liberal democratic state which is in the process of being reintegrated into the “international community” with its global circuits of people, capital and culture. Dominant discourses of jurisprudence, public administration, and political and economic management in this world leave little space for considerations of witchcraft as anything other than primitive atavism—a system of “beliefs” mired in ignorance and backwardness. Witchcraft beliefs may be real

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1 For a more detailed account of witchcraft in Soweto and a discussion of relevant literature, see Ashforth (1996). For a general study of witchcraft and politics in Africa, see Guschere (1997).

enough, according to this perspective, and may provide a potent source of motivation to action, but the witches and their powers are deemed purely “imaginary” - that is, not real. Yet amongst ordinary African people, even in the “modern” cities of the new South Africa, witchcraft remains a vibrant concomitant of everyday life. Life is lived on the assumption that the powers of witches are real, indeed, enormous. Their actions are experienced as assaults akin to crimes. Witches are implicated, moreover, in causing large-scale problems such as unemployment with which the state must grapple. Witchcraft, then, constitutes a sort of ontological fault line within the contemporary South African state, revealing discontinuities between the principles governing politics at the level of public institutions—imbricated as they are in global circuits of power and meaning—and those operative at the level of everyday life in African communities. Underpinning this paper is the question: what is at stake in the contest between these two schemes of being, acting, and meaning?

This paper, offered in the spirit of a report from the field, is part of a larger project seeking to plot some of the lineaments of this fault line in the political landscape of the new South Africa by means of a detailed political ethnography of Soweto. My general aim is to examine the ways in which Witchcraft is affecting the creation of a new state, as well as the ways in which the new state is understood as shaping the contexts within which witches work. In this paper I suggest that while for the present there does not appear to be any explicit involvement by political authorities in issues relating to witchcraft in Soweto, there is a good deal of pressure for such involvement. Moreover, Sowetans with whom I have discussed this matter in recent months consider it obvious that the government should be involved in solving the problem of witches in their community. The question, simply, is how? I will argue that the answers to this question that I have found to be emerging in Soweto hinge upon understandings of basic principles of democratic governance such as governmental responsiveness, collective action, and the role of expert knowledge in policy making. In the long-term, the paper suggests, the legitimacy of the democratic regime in South Africa will be solely challenged by the response of political authorities to issues concerning witchcraft in places such as Soweto.

Why Soweto?

I focus on Soweto because it is the principal black urban settlement in South Africa. Located beyond the generic suburbs of the drab modern city built upon the mines that a little less than a century ago drew the armies of the British Empire to this part of Africa — thereby bringing South Africa into the world — Soweto is in many ways a world unto itself. It was built as a dormitory for the black working people of Johannesburg:
a conglomeration of segregated black townships that grew, one after the other, to become the largest black urban settlement in southern Africa. Owned, administered, and policed—until recently—by white authorities within a racially-discriminatory state, Soweto has long had the character of a distinct city with a distinctive ethos overlaying complex patterns of socio-economic and ethnic diversity. People there call themselves Sowetans; they speak of “Soweto Style” drawing inspiration from diverse African, European, and American sources.

Estimates of Soweto’s population range from one to four million, although the counting is inaccurate and the districts that are typically thought of as Greater Soweto are not the same as the more restrictive administrative subdivision that once upon a time was named the South Western Townships. Yet while the place is like a city of several million strangers, it remains in many respects a web of interconnected villages populated by kin and neighbors who have known each other for generations. It is within these sorts of networks that witchcraft is considered to operate most powerfully.

I have been living in Soweto off and on since 1990—since shortly after the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of the liberation movements, and the beginning of negotiations leading to the new constitution. In this engagement with Soweto I have slowly come to appreciate the significance of issues of spiritual insecurity in everyday life and the unseen domains within which all relations of power resonate. Witchcraft is always a consideration in everyday life, even if just for jokes and gossip. Yet it is not the only thing in life, nor is it experienced in the same way by all Sowetans. Stories of witchcraft are mostly recounted with the warm convivial malice of good gossip. Witchcraft is also jokingly invoked as the cause of trivial mishaps when we are confident that malice is not really at work and to show that we are not afraid of such nonsense. Sometimes, however, and this has been the case at least once in the last five years in every family to whom I am connected, witchcraft is a matter of the most deadly seriousness.

As the oppressive system that was apartheid has come to an end, two profound transformations in everyday life in Soweto occurred. On the one hand, the greater opportunities afforded to Africans in government and the economy have opened rapidly growing inequalities in populations that in previous generations were compelled to live in conditions of relative socio-economic parity. Yet while opportunities were greatly expanded for the new black middle classes, the expected benefits of democracy...
failed to materialize for the majority of the population. Unemployment remains high and as the economy has been liberalized the value of the currency has fallen, resulting in a steep rise in the price of the imported consumer goods so essential to marking status. These factors are widely seen as expanding the prospects for jealousy and envy. On the other hand, interpreting the meaning of misfortune has become more complex. Hitherto, the misfortunes of individuals and families could be reckoned not only by reference to particular causes, but also to a general name hanging over the suffering of all black people—“apartheid”. Now the sorrows of an unfair fate can only be measured, case by case, against the conspicuous “progress” and good fortune of particular relatives, colleagues, and neighbors. Both of these developments feed into registers of Witchcraft.

Soweto in the late 1990s seems submerged in a sea of consumerism. When I first came to this place in 1990, everyone was obsessed with politics. We discussed the political situation endlessly. Political rallies were the great social events. On June 16th, 1990, fifty thousand people crammed into Jabulani Amphitheatre to commemorate the anniversary of the Soweto Uprising and celebrate the freedom that seemed close at hand. Everyday speech was peppered with political slogans. Young people addressed each other as “Comrade”—“Com” for short. Any gathering of friends would provide an occasion for singing the then unofficial national anthem Nkosi Sikelele and the hundreds of “struggle songs” that everyone knew by heart. Over the years of negotiations after 1990, the political fervor slowly died. It was reawakened somewhat by the election of 1994. In the celebrations following the ANC victory and Mandela’s inauguration, though, when the people of Soweto took to the streets in their thousands, the songs they sang were the old ones still calling for Mandela to be released from prison. Nowadays, only the worst political phonies use the honorific “Com” and you can go for months without hearing Nkosi Sikelele. But everyone knows the price of everything. If a supermarket is opening in Soweto tens of thousands of residents will gather for the bargains and festivities. A Score supermarket opened near our place in June. The line of shoppers waiting patiently for hours in the sun stretched hundreds of yards in an eerie echo of the lines queuing on voting day, April 27th, 1994. Fifty five thousand people attended the opening of the new Deon electrical goods store on the outskirts of Soweto. A week earlier, three hundred attended the official June 16th rally.

Political organizations in Soweto are moribund. By far the majority of voters supported the African National Congress in the national elections of 1994 and the local elections of 1995 and will probably do so again in the future, though with little enthusiasm. Of the hundreds of activists in my area of Soweto who were busy building the organization when it returned from exile in the early 1990s I know of none who are still members in 1997. Like most “mass parties” the ANC is mostly the
province of political careerists; there is nothing political now for the masses
to do. Periodically, the national or provincial government announces
some mass campaign or other—most notably the Masakhane [Let us build
together]—which falls on deaf ears. Elected officials of the national and
provincial governments have no significant local presence in Soweto.
Although representatives were elected on a national list system, the ANC
has required its Members of Parliament to establish constituency offices
and make themselves known locally. Only the most dedicated activist in
Soweto would know who these people are. Generally, voters are resentful
and apathetic. One long-time ANC supporter told me in June that she
would never vote again. She only voted in the local government elections
when she conceived the idea that with the new voter’s rolls the government
would be able to keep track of who didn’t vote and would probably
penalize them if ever they required assistance.

For the local government elections of November 1995, Soweto was
divided between the southern and western “Metropolitan Sub-Structures”
of the Greater Johannesburg area in an effort to increase the black presence
in the formerly segregated white suburbs of the city. Some local Council
members were elected on a party list system, others were elected to
represent specific local wards. From the discussions I have had with
councillors and residents in my area of Soweto, it seems clear that ward
councillors are being transformed into mini-chieftains, acting as brokers
for council-provided services and intervening in disputes among residents
and between residents and the council. For example, to start an “informal”
business in this area, it is necessary to get informal permission from the
councillor. Councillors, whatever their credentials as ANC militants, are
almost universally perceived as being in politics for their own financial
gain, just as in the old days of apartheid councils. And while Mandela
along with some others of the “stalwart” generation stand above this
suspicion, the movement of prominent national politicians into business
careers has further fostered the perception that politics these days is
business by other means. For local councillors, this means that their
long-term future will depend upon their ability to build networks of
patronage. It also means that as the local government struggles to impose
measures such as compulsory payment for services, councillors will find
themselves subject to the same repertoire of political action as of old
when houses were burnt and councillors necklaced as collaborators. They
are also being exposed to all the local forces of envy and intrigue that
are said to inspire witchcraft in the less fortunate. When the first dem-
ocratically-elected mayor of Soweto died in childbirth earlier this year,
for example, it was assumed here in kitchen table gossip that her political
colleagues should be suspected of witchcraft along with the usual suspects
of relatives and neighbors.

Social life in Soweto seems to have changed, too, in subtle ways as
if the barometer marking community fellow feeling and solidarity was
steadily falling. A rapidly spreading township fashion, for example, has householders building high brick fences reminiscent of the white suburbs in front of their homes, obscuring the dwellings from view and allowing access only through heavy steel gates. A few years back, such walls were unheard of here. Not only would they be frowned upon as ant-social, but the consensus was that while fences (usually of chain-link wire) and lockable gates were essential for the nocturnal security of households possessing cars, the general security of the family was better preserved by having the property open to scrutiny at all times by concerned neighbors. A house obscured by walls or trees was also considered to be a house where witches were free to work without hindrance. Regardless of their occult proclivities, no-one would want to advertise themselves thus. Now the walls serve both to mark status and secure protection from neighbors who cannot be trusted.

My friends in Soweto, like most others, strive to resist the pull of Witchcraft explanations for misfortune, knowing that such obsessions only increase fear and paranoia. Moreover, it is commonly known here that just as faith can heal, so too can fear strengthen the evil powers of witches. In the context of Sowetan life, however, resisting the fear of witches can be enormously difficult. This is not because people are ignorant and superstitious, although that can also be the case. Rather, from earliest childhood lives are lived in relationship with invisible beings and forces responsible for misfortune—and there is a great deal of suffering and misfortune to be accounted for. These evil forces are many and various, and every bit as important as those tutelary ancestral powers supportive of the good at work beneath the all-encompassing eye of God. The larger set of issues I am interested in concerns the ways in which these forces interrelating the innermost reaches of the self—the “soul”—with the highest planes of the cosmos—the heavens—connect with those forces and entities governing the legal subject in a modern state. While I have some experience of matters relating to witchcraft in the private domains of everyday life in Soweto, neither I, nor anyone else, has studied these issues emerging into public domains as a new African state comes into existence in the south of Africa.

Three Dialogues on Witchcraft and the State

As a prelude to a proper investigation of witchcraft and the state in Soweto, I offer the following accounts of three sets of conversations with Sowetans conducted between June and September, 1997. The first is with an old friend of mine, a member of the so-called “lost generation” of South African youth whose lives and prospects were disrupted by the struggles against apartheid of the 1980s. In this conversation, my friend raises the problem of the power of inyangas (“traditional healers”) or “witchdoctors”
a.k.a. *sangomas* and *ngakas*—usage is extremely flexible—in relation to the common good of a democratic polity as he struggles to come to terms with his personal misfortunes in the post-apartheid era and strives to find a way of lifting the curse of witchcraft from his life. The second, with an *inyanga* practicing in the Mapetla district of Soweto where I stay, reflects upon the healer’s work combating witchcraft in the area over the past sixteen years and the question of the proper relation between political power and divinatory expertise. Finally, I present a verbatim transcript of part of an interview with the Mayor of Soweto (technically, the Mayor of the Southern Metropolitan Local Council—which includes a large part of what used to be the South Western Townships). In the interview, the Mayor considers, for the first time, the question of the role of the newly constituted local government in relation to problems caused by witchcraft.

My purpose in presenting these three accounts is to show some of the ways these issues are beginning to bubble to the surface of community life in the new era. These conversations represent three perspectives on these issues which, while not scientifically sampled, are typical in revealing what might be termed a structure of plausibility in the consideration of these matters. They present a sense of the sorts of connections that are considered obvious in contemporary Soweto. In the conclusion I will suggest that what we are witnessing here is the birth of a question, a fundamental question about the nature and purposes of state power in relation to social evil with profound implications for the legitimacy of the political regime of democracy in South Africa.

One: A Man Afflicted

Three days after the Choku family buried their mother in 1996, following several years of nursing her chronic ill health, a prophet of the Zion Christian Church told the youngest son that the death was an “inside job”—witchcraft perpetrated by a family member staying in the same house. Madumo, the middle of three sons, was immediately suspected and accused of killing his mother with *muthi* (herbs) magic medicines. Two aunts staying in the same house during the period of the funeral endorsed the accusation. Madumo, then thirty, was unpopular with his relatives because he had been unemployed for years, was rarely able to contribute to household expenses, and had begun a correspondence course of university study. Life became intolerable for the accused. He was forced to leave his family’s home, wherein by right he should have expected to find shelter for as long as he required. Two days before sitting for his annual exams at the University of South Africa, Madumo was on the street struggling to survive by means of petty crime.

When Madumo consulted an *inyanga*, he discovered that his misfortunes were actually the result of another relative taking soil from his
mother’s grave, mixing it with herbs supplied by an unscrupulous witchdoctor and burying the mixture in a bottle in Madumo’s yard to bewitch the whole family, thereby bringing about the initial accusation of witchcraft flowing from the Zionist prophet’s divination. The fee for the inyanga’s services to rectify the problem (after an initial twenty Rand consultation fee and not including the cost of sundry chickens, candles, and sorghum beer) amounted to 650 Rands, the equivalent of six months rent for the room Madumo was occupying. Although he consulted a number of other inyangas and prophets who presented him with a variety of different stories, Madumo decided the grave-soil diagnosis was correct. To get his life back on track, he had no alternative but to find the money for the inyanga, by any means necessary.

Compounding Madumo’s problem was the fact that like that of many—perhaps most—young Sowetans, he was never really taught the proper procedures for communicating with his ancestors, who remain the principal source of ameliorative power. He has no solid grasp of “tradition”, that which Sowetans refer to, in English, as “Culture”; moreover, being estranged from his family and living alone, he is in a position for which, traditionally, there was no accounting. His father abandoned the family before Madumo was of an age to be taught the main rituals. The custodians of tradition in his family, the people who can speak authoritatively of the ancestors, their wishes, and the proper ways of relating to them, live far away in the rural areas and have no regular contact with their relatives in the city. Madumo has no money to travel to their place or to sponsor the expensive feasting that would re-establish communion with his ancestors. Madumo’s mother, although she was “spiritually inclined” and engaged in ceaseless commerce with the unseen worlds, died without passing on the traditions and rituals that would appease her side of the family. Madumo is thus left to stray alone through a world littered with spiritual and supernatural perils, a world where the ordinary hardships of life in a poor and violent place are exacerbated by the works of evil forces in unseen domains.

By engaging the services of an inyanga Madumo was voluntarily entering a relationship of physical and spiritual submission. The treatment was intense. For one long grueling month, in order to straighten out his relations with the spirits, my friend was put through the whole purgative repertoire of bleeding, vomiting, shitting, and sweating that the human body is heir to. At the climax of the treatment he came perilously close to kidney failure and death. By following the treatment, however, Madumo was able to deepen his faith in his inyanga and strengthen his confidence in dealing with the workings of unseen powers. As well as being something like a doctor, his inyanga was also a teacher, not to say priest. For Madumo was relying on the authority of the inyanga to re-establish the broken connections with his ancestors and teach him proper rituals to use in the future. These rituals were significantly different both
from those previously witnessed in Madumo's home, and those which are more common in other households in Soweto. If his inyanga had been mistaken, or if Madumo messed up, he risked the wrath of the ancestors. At the end of his 30-day course of treatment, which the inyanga adjudged successful, Madumo was restored to square one, so to speak. That is, the curse of witchcraft was removed. Now, if he continues to have problems—getting a job, say, or troubles with his landlady—they will be simple consequences of his lack of qualifications or other objective factors, not a result of witchcraft.

Madumo was convinced that he was not alone in falling victim to witchcraft in the "new" South Africa. In his view, most families in Soweto these days are suffering the ill-effects of witchcraft. And it is getting worse. You just have to be able to read the signs.

— "When would you say it started increasing?" I asked him one afternoon as we were lounging in his room behind MaDudu's shebeen.
— "I would reckon from Ninety Five", he said, "January. When Africans, South Africans, black South Africans, thought that they were free from the hands of the white man, everybody just told himself that 'Oh, we don't have any grudges with Whites, these lives in our brothers and all. Now we are going to face each other since we are all free now. We're going to face each other.' And one other thing that has caused this high volume of witchcraft is lack of jobs. When other families are going well, their lives are compared. They [families who are not doing well] become jealous to them and cause this harm. It's lack of jobs."
— "So it's freedom and democracy that has caused this?" I asked. "People are coming face to face with each other because they are no longer oppressed by the White Man?"
— "Ya", my friend replied, "direct confrontation. Like: Who owns this? Who's having this? I don't know how to put it. In fact, at first there was this thing of We want Freedom. Everything was blamed on the National Party. So, when everything was gone and black leadership took over, society has had to make a direct confrontation. So with all these bad fates now, misfortunes and all, we are pointing fingers to each other. There's no more of that old story of, I'm sore because of apartheid, because of a white man. Now it's: I'm like this because of my neighbour. It's turned around."

Moreover, as Madumo explained, those who used to sit back and say "the White Man has destroyed us" are now not in a position to establish themselves under the new dispensation—"unlike the other blacks who have accumulated education and equipped themselves with diplomas and all". The major problem of witchcraft is emerging from the losers in the struggle for advancement: "they are challenging the others with muthi [magical medicines]."

As Madumo explained, the "lack of jobs" has also caused the "high volume of witchcraft". This is because people are suffering and are thus more inclined to turn upon their neighbors. But this same lack of jobs has in itself been partly caused by witchcraft. Few people would attribute the structural weakness of the South African economy entirely to the
workings of witches. Nor would every unemployed person attribute their joblessness solely to witchcraft in every instance. But at the same time, it is extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion that witchcraft is not implicated in your plight when you lose a job while others don’t or fail to find one when others do. Obviously, then, at least part of the underlying problem of unemployment—that is, not just the distribution of a given quota of social misfortune—must be caused by witches. For Madumo, it is this aggregative aspect of the evil work of witches that demands collective restorative action. And it is inyangas, traditional healers, who should be responsible for this work.

While prepared to place his complete faith in his own healer to restore his personal good fortune, Madumo harbored a residual resentment against inyangas in general. The presence of large numbers of inyangas at the President’s inauguration on May 10th, 1994, made a big impression upon my friend, as it did on many others. But it also raised many questions: “If we’ve got so many traditional healers”, he asked, “why do we have to suffer by becoming victims of evil forces? Who paid those thousands of healers at the Union Buildings? Why can’t these healers protect our communities voluntarily?”

It was obvious to Madumo that while the witches were busy causing havoc, the inyangas had been standing idle. He had no doubt that the problem was a lack of will, rather than capacity:

“They can’t just let our community be destroyed by this evil monster that is not seen”, he said, “since they are in a position of curing it”. His view is that inyangas should stop operating simply on an individual basis, treating cases like his own as they come, one by one: “They should form a club. Like when they went to the Union Buildings for Mandela’s inauguration and danced and burnt all the herbs for all South Africans—Blacks, Whites, Indians and all. They should go from location to location and pour muthi on boundaries to keep out the witches. They should make rallies in the locations to sniff witches out, they should drive them out. They should protect the community by pouring their herbs in the street. We’ve got trucks and all. They should load in drums and drums of those herbs and pour them in the street. Sniff these people out. Definitely, I’m sure if they are going to protect us, witches won’t be strong. If they just burn their substances, witches won’t be strong.”

In other words, inyangas should seek to preserve the common good. As a child of the era of mass action in the 1980s, Madumo was transposing onto the inyangas and their work of healing the principles of organization and collective action learnt in the struggle against apartheid: “They should make rallies.” Most young men of his generation in Soweto are convinced that it was their battles with the police in the streets, their struggle and resistance, that toppled the regime of the Boers. Surely the same must be possible for inyangas. All that prevents such combination of inyangas in the interests of the community as a whole is their jealousy of one
another and their abiding interest in the continuation of witchcraft as the source of the ailments that drive their businesses. But while the autonomous action of individual witches can produce a situation of collective malaise such as unemployment, the individual actions of healers are proving ineffectual. In Madumo’s view, the inyangas should combine their powers to counteract large social-structural woes such as unemployment and bring forth the good fortune South Africa so desperately needs:

"Why can’t these people help us with foreign investment, they’ve the power to help with high escalating crime, help the police, in fact help the miners to produce more gold and prevent mines collapsing, and help fishermen down in wild seas, Help wineries in the Cape. Help with the different types of sickness that are found in the whole African continent, snuff all the witches and destroy them from the society, since these witches are really cruel and destructive."

Furthermore, he argued, the inyangas should stop their business of supplying political parties and organizations with the muthi that strengthens them in their fights: “Both sides had muthi, inthelezi, it’s meant for killing, ‘Madumo’, I replied, ‘if inyangas are so powerful why couldn’t they find that little girl in the East Rand?’”.

Interlude: Inyangas come to the aid of police

At the same time as Madumo was undergoing his treatment for witchcraft in the winter of 1997 a major police operation was underway in the East Rand, the first official joint operation of police forces and traditional healers. A child was missing. On March 25th, the day before she was due to testify in the trial of the man accused of raping her, seven year old Mamokgethi Malebane disappeared. By July, as a result of the usual incompetence of the police, the child had still not been found and the case became a cause célèbre in the Johannesburg press. The girl’s mother, with the assistance of SANCO, the congress of civic associations, engaged a sangoma (diviner) to find her. No luck. A reward of ten thousand Rands for information was offered by the police. On July 5th, the investigating officer, Sergeant Themba Mazibuko of the Child Protection Unit, convened a rally of diviners and prophets at the Vosloorus Stadium to determine Mamokgethi’s whereabouts. They came in their dozens, with thousands of onlookers. Finding things is one of the specialties of such people. Indeed one of the tests culminating the rituals of ukuthwassa, when diviners graduate from their apprenticeship (or are “initiated”, or “ordained” as some would have it), is the search for objects hidden by the senior inyanga presiding over their training. On July 5th, and throughout the following week, members of the South African Police Service at the behest of ancestral spirits acting through diviners searched houses.
rivers, and swamps in diverse parts of South Africa in quest of the little girl.

My friends in Soweto, like the rest of South Africa, were particularly amused by the story of poor Vusi Masondo, a sangoma from the East Rand, who made himself a laughing stock before a crowd of five thousand spectators when, insisting that the girl was in a river near Nyoni Park despite the failure of police divers to locate her, he was forced to enter the water himself to retrieve her. Bodies of water such as that river are often thought to be the sanctuaries of magical snakes, and Masondo was terrified that entering the water without appeasing the snake would put him in peril. The crowd had no sympathy, less patience. Masondo tossed a fifty cent coin into the waters in lieu of a sacrificial goat and began his search. After he leapt from the water in alarm, chased by the snake, the police divers, burly Afrikaners, fished out a rusty exhaust pipe. The crowd was merciless: Masondo was miffed: “We do not need white people to interfere with this”, he is reported to have said. “This is a black thing and needs the support of our people. All inyangas must come and coax the mamba so that we can take the child.”

Two weeks after the spectacle of sangomas, the man accused of raping the child, a neighbor of the family named Dan Mabote, was rearrested and, under the impression that he could apply to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for amnesty, confessed to murdering the girl, leading the police to a grave miles from anywhere pinpointed by the diviners. The first joint effort of police and diviners thus ended in flop. Media reports of the diviners’ efforts, especially the story of the hapless Vusi Masondo and his exhaust pipe mamba occasioned much mirth in Soweto at the time. Sowetans, in my experience, typically combine a deep faith in the general possibility of the divinatory enterprise with a hearty skepticism about particular diviners. This derives from the common experience of false revelation at the hands of diviners (frequently with unpleasant results for those falsely accused) and a recognition that divination is an easy way to take money from the gullible. Coupled with the embarrassing fiasco of Hintsa’s head in 1996, the Mamokgethi Malebane affair suggested the profession of divination was under siege. Their failure to find the child, however, was generally interpreted not as evidence that the procedures of divination were false and futile, but rather that the flock of inyangas who turned out to chase the reward money were phonies.

4. In a much publicized “discovery” in March 1996 a sangoma from the Eastern Cape, Chief Nicholas Gcaleka, claimed to have recovered in Scotland the head of Hintsa, a Xhosa king who was killed by the British in 1835. The skull was found not to be Hintsa’s and Gcaleka was denounced as a “charlatan out only to make money and boost his image as a sangoma healer”. Eddie KOHN, “King’s Skull Seized”, Weekly Mail and Guardian, March 15th, 1996.
Two: A Healer and His Craft

Above a small tin shack in the open ground in front of Merafe Hostel, a hand painted sign nailed to two knobbly-kneed posts announces, in Zulu and English with a Biblical twist, "Brothers and Sisters, we are able to cure any sick, please come to us." Outside the shack, on a table fashioned from an old packing crate, a collection of "ready mades", murky brown liquids in recycled half-pint liquor bottles, also advertises the business within.

The healer’s shack is divided into two rooms, an ante-room, where patients wait on coarse wooden benches, and an inner consulting room. An apothecary of roots and barks lining the far wall, piled loose on shelves and in a variety of jars, bottles, and recycled shopping bags, imparts to the shack the distinctive odor of South African herbalism, an odor that manages at the same time to be earthy, cloying, bitter and yet somehow sweet—utterly unlike any of the scents of antisepsis and cologne clinging to my memories of clinics and pharmacies. The healer waits in the inner room behind a table carefully overlaid with a covering of newspaper next to a window rescued from a wrecked kombi taxi. Mr Zondi is his name. He rose to greet us. He had been expecting us.

In 1981 Mr Zondi moved to Johannesburg and took up residence in Merafe Hostel in Mapetia near the railway station, where he opened his business. At first he operated out of his room, or, more accurately, the room he shared with fifteen other migrant workers. Then he built a shack outside the hostel to make his practice more accessible to local residents. Township residents always had an ambivalent relationship with the hostel and its population of several thousand single men. Residents used to enjoy the performances of traditional dances mounted by the hostel dwellers on Sundays in the sports grounds outside the hostel. Local men used to frequent hostel shebeens and occasionally use the showers there as most of the township houses had no bathrooms. But women, especially, often felt threatened by this enormous convocation of masculinity and were sometimes assaulted by envoys therefrom. Young people born and bred in the urban world of Soweto disdained the backwardness of those with rural roots living in hostels. Typically, young Sowetans treated migrants from rural areas such as populate hostels, as ignorant bumpkins. They still do. The hostel men viewed the local youths as vicious and degenerate, particularly lacking that defining quality of African culture—respect for elders. Since 1976, periodic explosions of political conflict between hostel dwellers and surrounding residents have not helped relations. In one respect, however, the rural areas overwhelm anything the city can offer: they are home to the most powerful witchdoctors—and to the most dreadful of witches. That Mr Zondi still works out of the hostel speaks well for his power, signifying rural roots in an urban domain. And although the hostels are no longer exclusively male, men predominate.
there. For many, this would be considered an added guarantee of the power of Zondi’s herbs—they are unpolluted by the presence of women.

I asked Mr Zondi if the problems patients were bringing him in 1981, when he began practicing here in Mapetla, were the same as those he was seeing today. “It’s getting worse, worse,” he replied. “Witchcraft?” I asked. “Too much, too much.” The problem, as Mr Zondi explains it, is not only that the volume of witchcraft is increasing, but the witches themselves are becoming more sophisticated. “They are becoming more and more professional,” he said. They cause the same problems as before: illness, death, misfortunes such as accidents, unemployment, infertility, discord and hatred in families, and so on. But these afflictions are becoming more difficult to cure. And the witches have assistants. When one witch dies, there is always an assistant to take over their work. They study hard. Sometimes the witch will hand on their secret knowledge to a son or daughter and the craft will pass down through families. Other times the assistant is not related. Always, in Mr Zondi’s view, the secret to their power lies in their knowledge of herbs. Inyangas depend for their powers upon ancestors, so they cannot reproduce themselves so easily.

To make matters worse for the bona fide practicing inyanga such as Mr Zondi, the “professional witches” are virtually indistinguishable from legitimate inyangas. Anyone can go to them and purchase deadly herbal weapons. They keep their practice totally secret, however, so that only those with evil in their hearts know how to find them. I have no doubt that such people exist and conduct a trade in muthi for purposes of witchcraft. Periodically, for example, local newspapers will carry reports of court cases involving the procurement and sale of human body parts. I understand this commerce of “professional witches” as being analogous to that of drug dealers in western cities. Every city in the world possesses an underground commerce in illicit drugs. Most decent citizens probably imagine this commerce to be more extensive than it is (and, certainly in the United States, political and civic leaders have long had an interest in exaggerating its scale), yet if one of these decent citizens suddenly decided to purchase a kilogram of cocaine, they would probably not be able to do so. Nor are their sworn agents, the police, ever able to eradicate the trade. Yet, miraculously almost, the trade persists, and those who desire the illicit substances find their way to those who can sell. Something similar probably happens with Mr Zondi’s “professional witches” and their clients in Soweto. Except in one crucial regard: while I have heard many people described as “witches”, and sat in on endless speculative discussions of the probable source of apparent witchcraft, I have never heard anyone recommend the services of a reliable “professional witch” with a high-quality product.

Legitimate “traditional healers” like Mr Zondi are regularly importuned by clients seeking herbs, muthi, to cause destruction. I want to see so-
and-so dead by sundown, they might say. Sometimes such people can be simply turned away with the advice to look elsewhere for the herbs they need. Other times they won’t take No for an answer. Mr Zondi chuckled as he told the story of a man who came to him looking for witchcraft herbs. Thinking to discourage him, Mr Zondi told him such herbs would cost five thousand Rands—a princely sum in these parts. Three days later, the man appeared with three thousand Rands in his pocket. Mr Zondi told him that he had been unable to locate his colleague who specialized in mixing such herbs. Come back later, he said. The man reappeared several days later with the full five thousand. According to Zondi’s telling, he said to the man that the specialist was still unavailable so he should go elsewhere.

The career of an inyanga depends entirely on reputation: reputation for power and reputation for integrity. If Mr Zondi sold the man the herbs and they didn’t work, he could become known as a dud, a “fake” inyanga. (After wasting five thousand Rands, the client would be sure to denounce him, although he would most certainly not admit his malicious intention in buying the herbs in the first place.) If, however, misfortune befell the person against whom the herbs were directed—which is not at all unlikely in this place of poverty, violence, and suffering—Mr Zondi might find himself with the dubious reputation of being a powerful witch, even though the muthi was bogus. Moreover, the reputation upon which inyangas depend is not only a matter of talk amongst neighbors and clients in the hostel or location. He has to think of his own ancestors. Their opinion matters more than anyone’s. If he should defy the ancestors, or misuse the gifts they have given, he risks losing his powers and, consequently, his reputation. Were he to become known in the neighborhood as a witch, he may even be killed.

There are two kinds of inyangas, then: those who practice witchcraft, and those who heal witchcraft. Nobody would ever admit publicly to being of the first group. And every inyanga that I have encountered vehemently asserts their place amongst those combating witches. Nor do they claim a capacity to turn evil forces to good ends. Their powers, they will say, come from ancestors and are intrinsically good. For this reason, some people get extremely agitated when inyangas and sangomas are referred to as “witchdoctors”, insisting that they are really healers, not witches. But the more vigorously inyangas deny their witchcraft and the importance of their healing practices, the more they invoke the figure of the powerful Witch, possessor of arcane knowledge secretive practitioner of an evil craft. Secrecy is the essence of this whole business. Whereas the healer’s knowledge is private—inspired by personal revelation from his or her ancestors—the witch’s knowledge is strangely public albeit derived, in principal, from a secret source. The way Mr Zondi speaks of these matters, the witches’ knowledge is essentially scientific, in the sense that it is, if only amongst witches, publicly verifiable, based on experi-
mentation, and transmitted by means of study and instruction. Witchcraft is often referred to colloquially as “African science”. For healers such as Mr Zondi, the professionalization of witchcraft means that they must be constantly on their toes in the battle against the swiftly-evolving tricks of the evil doers. Moreover, the healer such as Mr Zondi, who operates as a “traditional healer”, stands alone with his personal ancestors against legions of witches with their professionalized science. A further problem the legitimate healers face is that the witches are gaining access to ever more varied sources of herbs. *Muthi* is being drawn from all around the country although not, in Mr Zondi’s experience, from outside. The more complicated the mixture is, the more powerful it is; and with the witches’ pharmacopoeia increasing in diversity, the challenge of counteracting their herbs grows and the more quickly the healer must adapt. Do not expect to find any practitioners of ancient unchanging wisdom in this place, then. Where witchcraft is concerned in Soweto, the healer’s struggle is to adapt or die.

The obvious solution to the problem of “professional witches” posing as legitimate *inyangas* is the old device common to all professions seeking to keep out interlopers: the centralized Register of Practitioners and the Code of Conduct. When the Ralushai Commission inquiring into witchcraft violence and ritual murders, for example, produced its recommendations these were the central ideas drawn from the Zimbabwean system of Registered Traditional Medical Practitioners. On the wall of Mr Zondi’s consultation room, as on thousands of other walls, a framed certificate from the South African Council of Traditional Healers hangs. Such certificates are not difficult to obtain. An American woman describing herself as the “Cosmic Gypsy” tells a breathless story in her Webpage memoir *Igubu. The Sangoma Series* about how her mystical powers of healing were instantly recognized on a visit to South Africa by a *sangoma* she identifies as MT who was the Chairman of the local branch of the association: “Your eyes [are] really bright. [he said] Would you like to be member of our healers and herbal association? T/Dr K O /sic/ from Motherwell suggested you already, but it’s me that is the Chairman, so I have to decide.” The Cosmic Gypsy bought twelve years membership for three hundred Rands and received a certificate to hang on her wall in America next to her Ph. D.

The major problem with registration and accreditation for traditional healers is that their authority to practice comes directly from their ancestral spirits and the spirits recognize no higher authority in the form of government ministries or professional associations. Mr Zondi himself told

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6. The Cosmic Gypsy signed up for twelve years after MT told her he needed three hundred Rands for a “legal” problem.
me the story of how, as an apprentice undergoing *ukuthwassa*, his great-grandfather appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to discontinue the ritual singing which is the usual practice of apprentice *sangomas*. He was also instructed to use a certain gourd for divination rather than the more commonplace astragalus bones. Both of these innovations outraged the senior *sangoma* who was leading the young Mr Zondi through the process of becoming a healer. But the senior’s authority was nothing compared with that of the dead great-grandfather. Mr Zondi ignored the senior man and went his own way. And thus it will be if the state tries to interfere with the will of the ancestors.

I asked Mr Zondi again whether witchcraft was increasing, as many people had been telling me recently. He replied that indeed it was. Why? I asked. Jealousy.

This is the stock answer in these parts for the motivation of the witch: jealousy. In seven years I have never heard another reason given for witchcraft. It is nicely circular: Jealousy causes hate, hate drives witchcraft (as evidenced by its effects) must have been caused by hate. Why does anyone hate? Jealousy. The word names the original source of all ill will, and is usually cited in its English form. It is the fuel driving the engine of witchcraft (it is also cited as the main reason why men beat women). “Jealousy” in Sowetan usage encompasses both the resentment of another’s good fortune that is usually spoken of in English as “envy”, and the desire to restrict one’s good fortune and prevent others from enjoying the same. If you are prospering, people who are less fortunate will be jealous and will strive to take you down; if you are not prospering, those who are more fortunate will jealously guard their advantage and strive to keep you down. Jealousy is that which needs no further explanation. “Why would they be jealous of us?” I have asked when witchcraft seemed to be coming our way. “They just are”, was the reply. Enough said.

Seldom is jealousy displayed openly for all to see; for its natural habitats are the dark secret recesses of the heart where it feeds off “bitterness”. Friends who truly care for each other in this place will work hard to combat “bitterness in the heart” before it grows into hatred and jealousy. For people can appear to be friends while still nurturing hate. The commonplace assumption is that others see your good fortune as something taken away from them. Except for your closest and most trusted friends, you must assume that everyone else is actually, or potentially, jealous—and prepared to act upon it. To assume otherwise is to take untoward risks in opening yourself to attack by witchcraft. Some people are presumed more susceptible to jealousy than others. Older women top the list, for they have no productive or reproductive capacities of their own and are dependent upon the success and status of their children and grandchildren. Hence old women are most commonly associated with witchcraft not because they have intrinsically greater powers
Mr Zondi told me that he was quite puzzled about the recent increase in jealousy. “The way things are now”, he said, “when a person buys furniture, the other one gets jealous and wants to destroy him. You've got cows? They'll kill you. You can't buy a pair of trousers. You can't buy a car. You can't do anything with your life. They don’t want any progress. This jealousy is too high, and it causes the witches to be more active.” Mr Zondi’s view was that jealousy seems out of control in recent years since there has been freedom.

Certainly the “objective” conditions for an increase in jealousy are everywhere present in Soweto these days. Some people are prospering conspicuously while others are not. Most families are in the same sort of financial position that they were before the end of apartheid. At the same time, as I suggested earlier, the quickened sense of consumer desire is palpable and the drive to mark status through commodities intense.

“So what should be done about this increase in witchcraft resulting from the increase in jealousy?” I asked Mr Zondi. He had a solution: “The witches must be eliminated from the community.” From his standpoint as an inyanga, Mr Zondi explained, the problem of witchcraft has two dimensions. The first is the actual suffering inflicted upon particular individuals and families. It is the inyanga’s task to remedy this, and he does so by virtue of enlisting the support of the ancestors and directing the powers of healing herbs. But curing the effects of witchcraft leaves the perpetrator of the evil untouched and free to strike again. Of course, most of the treatments for witchcraft use muthi with the object of sending the curse back upon the one who had despatched it as well as protecting the victim from further harm. But this can only be done on a case by case basis and cannot disable the perpetrator completely and permanently unless the object be to kill them. If death be the object, is that not witchcraft in itself? And, if so, why not just kill the witches outright?

A further problem, Mr Zondi told me, is that the witches are getting too clever and have found ways of protecting themselves against the reversal of their spells. So the problem of the witches, the individuals responsible for harm and misfortune, is a problem for the community.

From Mr Zondi’s perspective, Madumo is mistaken to think that a convocation of inyangas could combine their spiritual forces in order to create a power capable of counteracting the cumulative effects of the multiple individual acts of witches. For the ancestors of one inyanga cannot transfer their capacities to another, nor is there any evidence in the contemporary urban context of ancestors working one with another or of certain founding ancestors reigning superior over others.7 Rather, in

7 The historical record shows that ancestors of the leaders of clans, tribes, and nations had significantly greater powers than ordinary commoners and could be
this view, the inyangas need to combine their expertise with the power of secular authorities to root out this evil at its source. The inyangas would act as policy advisers. Mr Zondi’s solution would be to convene a community forum to “sniff” out the witches. Each and every location in Soweto should establish such a forum and elect a committee of inyangas to oversee the process of elimination.

“How would the witches be identified?” I asked. Mr Zondi replied that if someone is a powerful witch around the community, the community knows it. Moreover, there are people who have muthi in their houses but who are not involved in healing people. Under the direction of the community forum, in Mr Zondi’s view, the police should round up these people and force them to drink their own muthi. If they are legitimate healers, they will be fine. If they are witches, the muthi will kill them. If someone refuses to eat their own muthi it simply means that he or she is a witch and should be punished. Unfortunately, the new constitution makes it difficult to deal with witches. In Shaka’s day, Mr Zondi says, the witches were simply killed: “Now they have these human rights, so you can’t just kill them.” But he is adamant that these scourges of the community should be imprisoned for life, and locked up away from other prisoners where they cannot get their hands on muthi. For the bottom line is that witchcraft is a crime.

I asked Mr Zondi about the role of the local council in all of this. In November of 1995, local council elections were held in South Africa, with Soweto being divided between two jurisdictions of the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan region. Each location of Soweto now has its own ward councillor. If witchcraft is as big a problem as Mr Zondi insists it is, surely these people, sworn to serve the community’s interests, should be doing something about it? I put this proposition to Mr Zondi. He agreed. “It is a good suggestion”, he said.

So Mr Zondi was keen to take on the idea that the local council should play a part in the control of witchcraft and the eradication of witches in Soweto. He considered that they could play a role, although they would have to be properly “procedural”, convening an elected council of inyangas to oversee the whole process. The danger is that people will just point out anybody, such as neighbors whom they hate, and accuse them of being witches. Even though the community does know when there is a

drawn upon to secure the common good of their descendants as a whole (see Willoughby 1928). Such notions took a beating under apartheid, although they remain current to some extent in rural ethnic enclaves. In polyglot urban communities such as are found in Soweto, however, the notion of superior collective ancestors has no purchase outside of Zionist churches. In the largest of these, the Zion Christian Church which is founded explicitly upon the model of the Pedi polity, for example, the founder Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane serves as a chief ancestor for all the members preserving the unity and fortunes of the church as a whole.
real witch in its midst causing real harm. False accusation can easily be fabricated. Everybody in these parts who was around during the political struggles of the 1980s knows how easy it is for innocents to be targeted as enemies of the community.

I asked Mr Zondi about the Council of Traditional Healers, whose membership certificate hangs framed upon the wall of his consultation shack and whose leaders have the power to intuit whether a diviner is for real or not. The main reason he displays the thing, it turns out, is not to proclaim authoritative accreditation in the way an orthodontist might who nails a degree to a surgery wall, but rather to ensure that if someone under his treatment dies he can certify himself to the police as a healer, not a murderer. It might also serve in his defense one day should someone in the community feel so inclined as to sniff him out as a witch.

Three: The Mayor

With Mr Zondi’s concern to root out witches fresh in my mind, I decided to talk to the Mayor of Soweto, Mrs Nandi Mayathula-Khoza, about the council’s role in witchcraft control. It took several weeks before I was able to get an appointment with Mrs Mayathula-Khoza, partly because she had to attend a meeting on local government and development at the United Nations in New York. We met in her office in the Council offices in Jabulani, built during the days of apartheid when councils and councillors were denounced as “puppets”. For the first half hour or so of our meeting, Mrs Mayathula-Khoza told me about the work of the new Southern Metropolitan Local Council in “development”—building roads and installing streetlights in Soweto. We discussed the problems of administrative reorganization and the difficulties of creating local democratic administrations. We discussed the problems of the so-called “culture of non-payment” and the difficulties the council was experiencing in its efforts to persuade residents to pay for the services they consume. Then I raised the question of witchcraft:

AA. Let me ask you a slightly different question. You might find it somewhat unusual. . . When I came back this year I found that people of many different kinds of backgrounds have said to me that witchcraft is much worse than ever, that it’s going out of control almost; that since the elections of 1994, the levels of witchcraft are rising continuously. . . I was having a discussion with an invanga at Merafe Hostel last week about this, and he was suggesting that each community—Phiri, Mapetla, Senaoane, and so on—should call upon the police to assist them in tracking down and dealing with witches. Now, in this sense, if that is a community problem that people talk about and see as facing the community, do you find as councilors, or at the level of the council that there has ever been any suggestion that part of your job should be to address this evil that is afflicting the community?

NM K. No, I haven’t really heard of any discussion, or I haven’t been involved in any discussion about that. Um, I don’t know. I don’t know, really. I’m
not well conversant with this subject. But I know one thing for sure that 
witchcraft is there. Okay. But I haven’t been personally inflicted with this 
problem as such. But if it is generally a problem experienced by members 
of the community and if the community wants to bring it up to council level. 
I’m sure council would be more than willing to address that problem and 
listen to people as to what kind of solution do they want to this problem. 
And if we can make any contribution towards that, in particular working with 
the police, because communities are now working with the police, council is 
working with the police and if they want the problem to be taken up by 
council. I’m saying we would be more than prepared to deal with that. But 
the kinds of problems basically that people have been experiencing and putting 
forward are developmental kinds of projects. Yes, there is witchcraft as a 
problem, but I’m saying so far, since I’ve been involved in council, since 
1994, I haven’t really been involved in a discussion dealing with that problem.

AA. You haven’t heard of anyone else that’s been asked to deal with aspects of 
this problem?

NM-K. Not within this council, not within the Greater Johannesburg Council or 
the Southern Metropolitan Local Council... But like I said, I really haven’t 
been personally inflicted, and I haven’t really personally experienced that. 
But I know one thing for sure. Even members of my family have experienced 
similar problems. And they’ve shared those problems with me and at that 
level then I know it’s taking place and I know it’s the biggest problem. But 
unfortunately it hasn’t come through to the council. But I’m saying that if 
it’s a community problem, and the community’s interested, or wants the council 
to be involved. I think Why not?

AA. What sort of response do you think you would get from the white councillors?

NM-K. There are white councillors, some from the National Party, Democratic 
Party, but we don’t have DP here [in the Southern sub-structure] and there 
are some white councillors as well within the ANC movement, the democratic 
organization. And I believe that witchcraft happens everywhere. It happens 
also in the white community, it happens in the black community. And there 
are sangomas who are white as well as sangomas who are black. So it 
happens almost everywhere.

AA. So if it came up at Council you’d be able to run a discussion in the Council 
Chamber that would be worthwhile?

NM-K. Yes, I think it would be worthwhile. But now the problem is that we 
are confined by the Ordinance, which actually defines the sorts of functions 
that we should carry out. And I’m beginning to think, and wonder, if the 
ordinances would actually allow us to embark on such discussion. But I’m 
saying if it’s a community problem then the council should really entertain a 
discussion of such. Because we have terms of reference as well for the 
council, terms of reference for various committees within the council. We 
also have caucuses. Probably it may be well taken, first at caucus level. 
Then if the caucus for various parties can actually decide that “Let’s take this 
up to the council”, then I’m sure we can be able to do it. even if the ordinance 
doesn’t spell out that we can actually entertain such problems.

AA. One of the things I’ve been doing is spending time with the local police. 
I drink at a shebeen there in the flats near the barracks and the police come 
after work. And discussing this issue with them, they find themselves caught 
in the position where officially witchcraft doesn’t exist according to the law.
There's the Suppression of Witchcraft Act, but that doesn't address witchcraft. It addresses witchcraft accusations. So it's illegal to accuse somebody of being a witch, but the actual practice of witchcraft is something else. And the police get caught in situations where they have to intervene, and often it comes down to private and unofficial action by them which is beyond the law. It's unofficial and informal policing.

NM-K. [chuckles] Yeah. And sometimes you'll find in some communities, people deal with that problem themselves and they get to kill you know a witch, a person who's considered to be a witch in a particular community. And again, that is considered as taking law into your own hands and it's just not allowed.

AA. I know in Senaoane there was a woman killed last year, do you remember that?

NM-K. I remember there was some case.

AA. It was the mother of this gangster, Chafunya.8

NM-K. Yes, yes, the Chafunya gang. It's true. But then that was not a witch-related problem, it was crime-related.

AA. But after the schoolboys got Chafunya, she was killed because they believed she'd been giving him muthi to strengthen him as a thug.

NM-K. Okay, to be involved in the criminal activities that he was involved in. No, you are correct. I remember very well. And that also she was allowing those children to carry on the evil work that they were doing. I remember, it was mainly the youth who stoned that mother to death... that lady, they'd taken the law into their hands. Yeah, it's a big problem. You know, one realizes that it's a big problem when you discuss it with somebody else. Yeah.

AA. This is what I was talking about with the police. In such a situation where you have a crowd, especially when it's usually schoolchildren at the forefront of these things [mmm] who are targeting a witch. If you step in as police and protect this mother, because she has a right to live under the constitution and your duty is to uphold the constitution, in fact from the point of view of the community, you are protecting a witch. And the witch is a source of evil to the community.

NM-K. To the community.

AA. And this is a problem that the police, the councillors, and the government are supposed to represent the community and to solve problems facing the community. It's potentially very difficult.

NM-K. It is very difficult. You know, now that we've spoken about it. I think I'll just discuss with other councillors informally and hear what their opinion is about this problem. And probably we could then take it to various caucuses

8. Chafunya was a notorious criminal who terrorized the Senaoane and Phiri neighborhoods of Soweto in the mid 1990s until he was killed in a gunfight by a young man, a high school student from Phiri, in a quarrel over a girl. When the police arrested the killer of Chafunya, the schoolboy's friends mobilized at the school grounds and marched to the police station where they caused a riot demanding his release. They then marched to Chafunya's mother's house, stoned her to death as a witch, burnt her house and began a military campaign against the other members of Chafunya's gang.
and discuss it and see if we can’t really give quality time to it in terms of discussing it and working with the community in coming up with means and ways of resolving this problem... No, we will look at that. Definitely. It’s interesting.

When the Mayor of Soweto and her colleagues on the Council do get around to talking about what is to be done about witchcraft, it is difficult to imagine what they can say—beyond putting forward proposals for eradicating the belief in witches—that will not seem ridiculous to their colleagues who represent the suburbs and do not live in worlds with witches. In South Africa, such people are known as Whites. They have a long history of misunderstanding Africans, with little credit to their claims that they have the best interests of Africans at heart. What options remain, then, for those who would act in the name of the state in confronting the prickly subject of witchcraft?

Witchcraft and the State. The Birth of a Question?

Madumo resents the failure of healers to organize themselves and cooperate in protecting the masses. Mr Zondi bemoans the increasing professionalism of witches and calls for a conjoining of the expertise of inyangas with political power and community action to eradicate them. Mrs Mayathula-Khoza wonders what can be done to meet the needs of community beset by witchcraft and worries about people taking the law into their own hands. Is there a common thread here?

In the three dialogues presented above (representing innumerable other conversations), I want to suggest that we are witnessing something like the birth of a question. This is a question that is only beginning to become relevant in Soweto (and, I would argue by extension, South Africa), but which has profound implications for the long term future of democracy. For in the long run, the ways in which this question is answered will determine the perceived moral character of political power.

That question is: What is the purpose of Government?

Prior to the transition to democracy in South Africa, it was clear to everyone in Soweto that the purpose of government was to operate the System, and the purpose of the System was to oppress and exploit black people. The Government, at least in the dying phases of apartheid, was seen as an unmitigated source of evil. Behind the apparent face of political power, behind the image of those men like F.W. De Klerk who presented themselves to the public as the Government, right-thinking and responsible in all respects, people perceived an originary source of evil power. The hidden, secret, nature of this power fostered fantasies about an enormous capacity for causing misfortune far in excess of anything yet uncovered by investigations into covert and illicit state actions. Counterposed to the Government was the Struggle. The purpose of the struggle was clear:
Freedom. Behind the apparent disorder of the Struggle were secret organizations of freedom fighters who achieved a mythic status far in excess of their actual military achievements.

With the first democratic elections of 1994 the express purpose of government changed. The African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela, took office brandishing a “Reconstruction and Development Programme” (RDP) and promising a “Better Life For All”. A state which for generations had been experienced as an alien and oppressive force was now proclaimed as the representative (and representation) of the People—the “Rainbow Nation”. Much has been made in South African political commentary of recent years about the crisis of “expectations” amongst black voters. Most people have yet to see the good life, and the RDP has largely disappeared from the political horizon, living on mainly in the form of sardonic jokes in the township. Disappointment alone, however, is not necessarily calamitous for a state, especially if there remain other parties to curry favor at the next election. More problematic, I would argue, are the habits that develop around the framing and answering of the basic question: What is government for?

This question of the real purpose of government is starting to emerge in everyday political discourse in Soweto. Although rarely framed as an abstract inquiry, it constantly bubbles to the surface in talk when people ponder the moral nature of the powers that seem to be shaping (or not shaping) their lives. When the talk is of witchcraft, a source of evil and affliction for the whole community, the way the question of the purpose of government is answered is of profound importance. In common with everyone else I have spoken to about these issues in Soweto, my interviewees see the problem of witches as a political matter demanding community action. Yet they do not automatically see it as the responsibility of the state. I would suggest that they do not do so for two simple reasons: First, although the apartheid state provided many services, it was never particularly responsive to the needs of indigenous people and most black people saw the state, amongst other things, as a structure of discrimination and favoritism systematically biased in favor of Whites. Consequently, habits of turning to the state for assistance are shaped in terms of improving the flow of goods which previously were restricted to Whites. Second, the predominant discourses and ideologies within the ruling African National Congress while they may countenance debates about capitalism, socialism and democracy, even “Africanism” are thoroughly within the traditional frameworks of “western” political thought and action and thus do not readily generate questions about the role of the state regarding witchcraft. However, and this is the point that needs to be stressed, whenever I have discussions with people in Soweto about the connection between the purposes of a democratic state and the problem of witches in the community is made, it seems obvious to all concerned that witchcraft is a matter that should be addressed by government.
Two years ago, when the Government of National Unity was young and untried, my friend Madumo was not so concerned with the question of inyangas and their power as he was when I found him in 1997. Five years ago, the question would not have entered our heads. Of course, in earlier times he had not been so badly bewitched. Many other friends in Soweto who have escaped that fate are not as preoccupied with the occult as Madumo. Nonetheless, the issue of witchcraft is immensely more salient today than it has been previously. Madumo’s faith in the possibility of amalgamating inyangas to work for the common good comes in the wake of a general disillusionment in the capacity of government to deliver the “better life for all” which its election slogans promised and which was sincerely believed to be the inevitable fruit of freedom. It is also formed in the context of a widespread faith in the power of collective spiritual action and the power of prayer. When Mandela speaks of the “small miracle” that was the transition to democracy, many people take him literally and thank the otherworldly force that brought it about. For Madumo, as a child of the era of mass action in the struggle against apartheid, it is obvious that inyangas should combine in a form of collective action to remedy the ills besetting the nation as a whole. Thus Madumo’s call for inyangas to work together to assist the government in pursuit of the common good is not totally implausible.

Madumo’s call is not implausible. It is, however, mistaken. As the discussion with Mr Zondi, the healer, makes clear, the authority to heal and the capacity to cure are not bestowed by ancestors in such a manner as to make mass action by inyangas, or even small scale co-operation, any more effective than individual action. Mr Zondi’s concern is to connect the business of healing to the power of the community—either through the state or by means of collective action—and to have healers and diviners serve as expert advisors in the identification of witches. Secular powers would take over in the apprehension and punishment of offenders once divination produces the damning evidence of their crimes. Diviners then, would serve as expert witnesses in the trials of witches and policy advisors in elaborating procedures for the effective control of witchcraft.

9. On March 23rd, 1994, for example, Lieutenant-Colonel Johan Botha of the South African Police was praying at his home in Nelspruit when an angel appeared and, according to the Citizen (a right-wing newspaper with an impeccable record in supporting the actions of the SAP), “told him that the peace initiative in South Africa would not succeed unless all its people joined in prayer” (Thursday, 7 April, 1994, p. 5). Botha began a campaign for a National Day of Prayer which culminated in a prayer rally at the Johannesburg Easter Show and services around the country.

10. Such a role for inyangas is commonplace in the so-called People’s Courts which are still periodically convened in Soweto. In my experience of these proceedings, evidence uncovered through divination is routinely accorded the same status as
with state authorities to remedy the problem of witchcraft by eradicating witches. This is an updated version of the “traditional” version of the proper relation between diviner and Chief in witchcraft matters. Mr Zondi might find this vision of a policy-role for inyangas appealing. The world’s press, however, would descend upon Soweto and hold them up to ridicule. For Mrs Mayathula-Khoza, despite the fact that she had never thought about the problem of witchcraft as a matter of government, the connection, when pointed out, was instantly apparent. Her worries about people “taking the law into their own hands” gave the issue some urgency. For, as this discussion suggests, the issue of witchcraft in the community is a question of law and justice: state incapacity is readily matched by a public appetite for vigilantism, such as when the schoolboys killed Chafunya’s mother. In my discussion with the Mayor, as soon as witchcraft was placed in the category of social problems besetting the community, it became obvious to her that the same methods used by government to address other issues—committee meetings, discussion, and debate—should be applied to the problem of witchcraft. Yet it is by no means obvious what these discussions could achieve.

People living outside the worlds of witches (which includes myself and virtually everyone else who has written on the subject along with the representatives of the white suburban areas in the Southern Metropolitan Areas of which Soweto forms a part) are united in conceiving of witchcraft as a matter of belief serving to motivate social action—albeit with a wide variety of associated idioms and discourses. Those who live with witches as a reality engage with witchcraft as a form of action in itself: a form of action which involves causing harm and which is something like a crime. This is where the “ontological fault-line” of which I spoke at the opening of this essay opens up. Of course, within liberal democracies a great deal of ontological pluralism can be permitted. You can believe in the virgin birth and the power of prayer and I can believe in the spaceship behind Hale-Bop and, so long as we respect each other’s rights, we can all get along. Surely witchcraft can be accommodated within such pluralism as well? This would indeed be the case were witchcraft, in practice, simply a matter of “belief”. However, as stressed above, witchcraft is generally understood in Soweto as a form of action, a mode of perpetrating harm from which the community must be protected. Protecting communities is very close to the central notions about the purposes of states in liberal political theory.

If witchcraft was a marginal matter in people’s lives none of this would matter very much. But, as I hope the conversations reported above make clear, witchcraft does matter. And the consensus is that it is getting worse as a direct result of changes brought about by democracy. The

that presented by witnesses, especially if it endorses a preponderant sentiment in favor of the guilt or innocence of the accused.
new regime is approaching the point of reckoning where they are either seen to be doing something about the witches, or they are seen to be in league with the witches. And, as is demonstrated in the case of Chafunya’s mother, along with many hundreds of similar killings in recent years throughout the country, people are accustomed to taking the law into their own hands in these matters. If those who act in the name of the state—whether as judges, police, or the Mayor of Soweto—are to avoid the charge of aiding and abetting witches by preventing people from taking the law into their own hands, they must be seen to be doing something about witchcraft. Yet treating witchcraft seriously, as any African politician must, poses a fundamental challenge for the criminal justice system within a “modern” democratic state. For it is impossible for state authorities to recognize witchcraft as a form of action in the manner it is seen in Soweto without fundamentally compromising the basic principles of evidence and the notions of rationality, agency, and intention that constitute legal doctrines of responsibility. The nearest they could come would be some variant of the current position of accepting a sincere belief in witchcraft as a “mitigating factor” in relation to other crimes—such as assaulting and killing people accused of being witches.

Not being a witch, I cannot rightly say in what the essence of the action that is witchcraft consists. No-one else I have ever encountered can do so either. It is perhaps a question that cannot be answered, and this is not the place to try. However, from the ways in which I have heard people in Soweto talk about witchcraft, including the three reported above, the closest I can come to saying what sort of action witchcraft is as it is spoken of in Soweto is to say that it must be some kind of work, indeed, a craft: a matter of combining knowledge, skill, technique (and technology), and effort to produce results in the world. Is witchcraft a form of work that can be regulated by the state? I doubt it. My friends in Soweto, however, do not. And if it turns out, as I suspect it will, that the government can neither do anything about witches nor about the circumstances that are making witchcraft more prevalent, the question will be asked even more insistently: what is government for?

Furthermore, if the government fails to mitigate the misfortunes of poverty, unemployment and disease, the question will arise: To what extent are the witches responsible? In that case, too, when government seems to be about something else than securing a “better life for all”, the question must surely be asked: What role do the witches play in securing, through the state, the good life for some?

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of field research in Soweto, South Africa, since 1990, this paper reports that witchcraft is commonly thought to be increasing as a direct result of the transition to democracy. This paper begins an examination of the question of witchcraft violence and democracy in Soweto by presenting three dialogues on witchcraft and the state: with a man afflicted by witchcraft, a traditional healer, and the mayor of Soweto. Its aim is to uncover the structure of plausibility within which questions concerning the purpose of power in a democratic state are being framed and answered in a context where witches are a vital and terrifying feature of everyday life.

SUMMARY

Sorcellerie, violence et démocratie dans la Nouvelle Afrique du Sud. - A partir d’enquêtes de terrain réalisées à Soweto, en Afrique du Sud, depuis 1990, cet article entend souligner le fait que la pratique de la sorcellerie se développe au fur et à mesure que se met en place le processus de transition démocratique. L’auteur confronte les problèmes de sorcellerie, de violence et de démocratie qui se posent à Soweto; puis il présente trois dialogues faisant état des relations entre la sorcellerie et l’État: un dialogue avec un homme ensorcelé, un avec un guérisseur traditionnel, et un autre avec le maire de Soweto. Le but de cet article est d’examiner la structure argumentative à l’intérieur de laquelle les questions concernant la nature du pouvoir dans un État démocratique sont enoncees et débattues, ceci dans un contexte où les sorciers représentent un aspect à la fois vital et terrifiant de la vie quotidienne.

Keywords/Mots-clés: South Africa, Soweto, Democracy, Violence, Witchcraft, Afrique du Sud, Soweto, démocratie, sorcellerie, violence.