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Bones of Contention: Exploring the Role of Occult Practices in South Africa

In 1857, a prophecy received by a fifteen-year-old Xhosa girl named Nongqawuse almost destroyed the Xhosa nation entirely. The Xhosa were in crisis, white settlers had been pushing them off their land, and their cattle – the source of their food and wealth – were dying of a mysterious lung disease. Nongqawuse's vision promised the resurrection of the tribe's former glory and the banishment of the English settlers, if the people would only sacrifice their cattle and all of their crops. Nongqawuse was the niece of a well-respected diviner named Mhalakaza, who was the first to follow his niece's instructions. Once the people within their community saw Mhalakaza heed the prophecy, they too embraced Nongqawuse's vision and followed suit. The promise of healthy cattle replacing the diseased herds that the Xhosa owned at the time was an attractive prospect, and so the slaughter spread. Kraal after kraal and community after community sacrificed their cattle to fulfil a prophecy that would never materialize. Eventually, even Sarili, the paramount chief of the Xhosa nation, had his cattle slaughtered and ordered his people to do the same. As time went on and the slaughter continued, the people began to starve, and by the end of the year, the Xhosa population had shrunk from 105,000 people to just 38,000 (Holland 85).

This demonstration of costly signaling is best understood if one appreciates the significance of cattle within Xhosa culture. There is a saying in Xhosa, *inkomo luhlanga, zifile luyakufa uhlanga*, which, loosely translated, means *when the cattle die, the nation dies*. The investment of the Xhosa nation in Nongqawuse's vision demonstrates their desperation and also underscores the tragedy inherent in this event. Many cultures are driven or motivated by the

visions and prophecies of gifted individuals. In Judeo-Christian tradition, it is Noah's vision that saves the animals from destruction during the great flood. Muhammad's visit from the angel Jibral in the cave at Hira seeded a religion that is currently practiced by 1.8 billion individuals worldwide. And even Martin Luther King, Jr., had a *dream* rather than a *plan*.

Why then, do we consider prophecy, divination, and sorcery to be an old-fashioned construct from which Africa must be freed in order to compete in the modern world? In the West, witchcraft has largely been relegated to the bookshelf, featured in young adult fiction, in October film releases and in metaphor. In most of Africa, witchcraft is still a feature of daily life. In a 2012 paper published within *African and Asian Studies*, Cameroonian scholar and professor of theology at Stillman College in Alabama David T. Ngong argues that Africans must "overcome this ruinous imagination" in order to "facilitate Africa's dignified participation in the modern world" (Ngong). The underlying assumption appears to be that Africans are not participating in the modern world, or, at the very least, not in a manner that Ngong considers to be dignified. Ngong's understanding of modernization appears to be widely accepted; just this week in an anthropology class, I observed that the assigned textbook defines modernization as "the general process by which societies transform economically, socially and culturally to conform with the standards set by industrialized Europe" (Brodd). Not everyone agrees with this definition, however; French philosopher and professor at the London School of Economics, Bruno Latour, would likely counter that modernities themselves are different, as argued within his 1993 book *We Have Never Been Modern*. More recently in his 2005 contribution, *Reassembling the Social*, Latour argues for what he terms "practical metaphysics," in which anything that an actor cites as a motivational source for his or her action is considered "real" (Latour). By this logic, all witchcraft activities are real insofar as they are actions undertaken by

individuals and motivated by a genuine belief in the existence of powerful occult forces. Furthermore, we should be able to study them without passing judgment on their inherent modernity or lack thereof due to the relative nature of modernity itself.

Latour's argument allows for a world in which different and sometimes contrasting beliefs and ideas may coexist -- a plurality of worlds, in a way. This idea is reminiscent of Baudrillard's simulacrum in that we remove the discussion from the actual, physical world and wander into the realm of theoretical worlds, worlds created by and at least partially within the realm of the imagination. Within these worlds, witchcraft is a very real, tangible phenomenon, accompanied by associated economic, social and political factors. Regardless of what theory we apply to justify the implementation of academic distance from the subject, that distance is necessary to avoid getting tangled up in ethnocentric judgments, which may hamper our ability to understand the subject of our study.

The value of this proposed distance is demonstrated once one begins to seek the underlying cause of the increase in socially-sanctioned occult practices in South Africa in recent decades. The first explanation I wish to examine counters Ngong's argument that tolerance of witchcraft contributes to an increase in witchcraft activity. Ngong presents a critical view of tolerance:

> By treating stories of witchcraft as if they were more effective ways for Africans to interpret their modern conditions, these scholars actively contribute in encouraging Africans not to think in other ways that may give different and sometimes even more helpful interpretations of the African condition (Ngong).

Beyond his contentious insinuation that Africans are a united monolith, Ngong's statement is problematic in that it implies that the everyday African is simply waiting for a Westerner to

sanction or condemn his behavior. In contrast, John Hund, a professor of African Law at the University of Limpopo in South Africa, argues that intolerance of witchcraft practices impedes our ability to effectively manage witchcraft accusations when they occur. Writing in a paper for *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, Hund states that "prior to the implementation of the [Suppression of Witchcraft] act, bewitchment was a worry but like all worries it had remedies. By criminalizing these judicial remedies on the ground that they were repugnant to the 'civilizing mission' of the white, Eurocentric, apartheid government, the seeds of chaos were sown" (Hund). Hund's observation offers a demonstration of what happens within this specific African region when Western authorities do condemn occult practices. In 1957 the Apartheid government passed a law that attempted to curtail witchcraft practices within South African society. However, as Hund establishes through his paper, this legislation simply served to force occult practices into the shadows, and also had the unintended consequence of increasing witchcraft related violence.

The Suppression of Witchcraft Act criminalized customary court involvement in witchcraft accusations, inadvertently creating the impression that the diviners, witches, and traditional healers held more political and societal power than the people. Left without legal recourse, the people turned to mob justice to resolve disputes that had previously been resolved in the more formal arena of the tribal courts. For generations, customary law had held that a witchcraft accusation would be assessed by the chief and, in some cases, a council of elders. Investigations were undertaken and false accusations were discouraged through the application of harsh penalties against the accuser if the accused was acquitted and malicious accusation was demonstrated. Under this old system, mob justice would be punished severely; however, left without the customary court recourse to which they were accustomed, mob justice was all that

the people had left. Hund's explanation would account for the increase in witchcraft related violence, but offers little by way of contribution to our understanding of the roots of occult behaviors.

My central question is not what causes an individual to accuse another of witchcraft, but what particular circumstances may cause an individual to turn to witchcraft or related occult behaviors as the solution to a problem. What role do these beliefs play in South Africa today? In the case of Nongqawuse and the Xhosa cattle sacrifice, the precipitating factors were clearly the dual pressures of white settlement and the mystery illness that beset their precious cattle. The work of John and Jean Comaroff, both Harvard anthropology professors, offers an intriguing study of what they term "occult economies" – which they define as "the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends" (Comaroff 279). Their book offers the argument that individuals turn to the occult in an effort to process and participate in events that they do not fully understand. Further, these responses intensify in relation to the magnitude of the triggering event. In the Comaroffs' view, the increase in occult activity in South Africa is the direct result of global capitalism. Within many communities in South Africa, capitalism is not viewed as a fair or reasonable system in that it involves a set of ever-changing and deeply mysterious rules. This opacity, therefore, requires the expertise of one who is able to manipulate unseen, complicated and mysterious forces – the witch-doctor. The number of sangomas, also known as witch-doctors or traditional healers, in South Africa is far greater than the number of doctors specializing in Western medicine. A recent study published in the *SA Pharmaceutical Journal* claims that 200,000 sangomas are currently practicing within the country, while only 25,000 licensed medical doctors serve the same population (Truter). A high concentration of South

Africa's sangomas live and work in the major urban centers of Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town.

Johannesburg is a large, bustling and cosmopolitan city, peopled by over nine-and-a-half million people (UN.org). In a 2008 survey conducted by Mastercard, Johannesburg was the only African city ranked amongst the top 50 "Worldwide Centers of Commerce". The container terminal at City Deep is the largest dry port in the world, and the city also houses a thriving industrial hub and a commercial sector boasting businesses functioning in diverse industries, such as banking, IT, real estate, transport, broadcast media and many other sectors. The city is also believed to be the largest man-made urban forest in the world (Johannesburg). Inextricably intertwined with all of her monuments to Western capitalism, however, exists an economy of an entirely different nature-- the physical manifestation of the Comaroffs' occult economy.

Driving to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (the hub of trade for the entire African continent) from just about anywhere else in this sprawling metropolis involves getting onto, and off of, one of Johannesburg's many freeways. It is at the intersections of these arteries and the veins that spread out across the rest of the city that one is most likely to glimpse concrete evidence of the socially-sanctioned witchcraft that pervades everyday life in this region. Posters wallpaper the freeway underpasses, advertising the services of local sangomas (witch-doctors / traditional healers), and the briefest of pauses at a traffic light will ensure that the flyer-sized versions of these same advertisements end up inside your vehicle. These pamphlets typically detail the services that the sangoma provides in a fairly simple list, or, in some cases, the problems that they promise to solve. The flyers include contact information and are usually a half- or quarter-page size, printed in a single- or two-color format.

Fig. A: Sangoma Flyers from Johannesburg

These documents (fig. a) offer us a glimpse of modernization as it applies to the arena of the occult. Sangomas advertise online, and, in some cases will throw and interpret the bones or provide other divination and healing related services via Skype or Facetime for their clients. The pamphlets also offer a tidy list of possible reasons why an individual may look to the occult for solutions to their problems. These motivations seem to fall into a couple of categories: first – medical problems, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive difficulties, or HIV and AIDS; and then relationship problems; and legal or business related issues which would seem to confirm the Comaroffs' argument in which enigmatic economic forces require mysterious, even magical, solutions.

Acclaimed South African anthropologist, Isak Niehaus, has investigated the role of witchcraft in South African life in great depth within recent decades. Within a paper written for *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, he explores the binary between witchcraft and medicine. Niehaus examines the similarities between responses to the Kuru epidemic in Papua New Guinea and to the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. He details the long journey from initial observation of Kuru (a degenerative disease caused by a pathogenic

protein known as Prion, ingested through the consumption of the flesh of deceased family members) through finding the behavioral, and eventually also the physiological, cause. He also investigates the shifting relationship between the researchers and the research participants. He then connects his Kuru research to his observations of similar dynamics in response to the AIDS epidemic in Bushbuck Ridge, a rural community in South Africa. Niehaus circles back frequently to claims of witchcraft arising as a form of resistance to victim-blaming in both communities. These groups appear to have a particularly difficult time allocating responsibility for illness to the victim of said affliction. The victim / aggressor binary is particularly strongly embedded and any blurring of these lines creates confusion and mistrust. Niehaus also draws a parallel in the failure of Western medicine to resolve these crises, stating that "sorcery now became the hegemonic explanation for Kuru. It accounted for the resilience of Kuru against biomedical interventions and, at the same time, countered victim blaming" (Niehaus 31).

This reference to the failure of biomedical intervention places Niehaus in direct opposition with Ngong, who, in his paper "Stifling the Imagination: A Critique of Anthropological and Religious Normalization of Witchcraft in Africa", argues for the replacement of witchcraft with science in the African imagination, asserting that, as long as researchers are accepting of witchcraft practices, Africans will continue to practice, venerate, and fear it. The conflict emerges in Niehaus's contention that sorcery remains where medicine fails. It must also be noted that these two ideologies often co-exist. In Niehaus's paper – "Kuru, AIDS and Witchcraft", he studies the role of public health educators in the Bushbuck Ridge area of South Africa, using examples to illustrate how the locals are constantly assailed by medical data, trainings, healthcare visits, and seminars. He refers to the "unequal exchanges" inherent in this system and details how the focus on prevention created the impression of a "fatal, incurable, and

untreatable disease," potentially creating a situation in which the people, told that there was no medical cure, would turn to witchcraft for relief. In "Stifling the Imagination," Ngong proposes that science and the western world should step in to save the Africans from their imagination, while in "Kuru, AIDS and Witchcraft," Niehaus demonstrates how the omnipresence of research and medical interventions sends those same individuals running to the witch doctor for solace.

Ngong, Niehaus, and the Comaroffs have each demonstrated how individuals may turn to the occult to resolve problems experienced within business and personal relationships and in order to protect the health of themselves or those close to them. The story of Nongqawuse and the Xhosa cattle slaughter reveals how a nation in crisis may turn to the occult en masse in order to fight back against forces that threaten them. Each of these examples contributes something to our understanding, but none of them alone adequately explains the role of the occult in South African society today. In order to begin to comprehend this role, we need to examine the common thread between these seemingly disparate ideas – the construction of social bonds and the group dynamics at play in the communities surveyed. In his study of similarities between community responses to Kuru and to aids, Isak Niehaus observed that the affected peoples were, in both cases, distinctly uncomfortable with the allocation of blame to the victim of the illness. The Comaroff study of occult economies reveals a tendency to seek out supernatural resolutions rather than adapting the manner in which we interact with the financial landscape, in keeping with Western norms. Perhaps this connection is the key – it is outsiders, medical researchers, and anthropologists who suggest that the community's funerary rites are responsible for Kuru. It is these same interlopers who point to promiscuity when establishing a pattern of behavior that leads to AIDS, and it is these intruders who introduced global economic forces after driving the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa off of their lands. Even Professor Ngong's solution

involves the implementation of Western ideals in pursuit of greater involvement in the international markets.

If we are to acknowledge that South Africa experiences its own African modernity, then we must accept the role that the occult plays in that particular modernity. When we in the US experience trauma, as observed in the recent Las Vegas shooting, we fill our social media pages with calls for "thoughts and prayers," while other nations rail against our apparent unwillingness to change the laws at the root of our terrible gun-violence problem. This approach to social problems clearly shares aspects of the South African's unwillingness to disengage their own social norms and bonds in favor of those espoused by well-meaning outsiders. Sangoma flyers reveal a particular pattern of concern – the individuals consulting occult practitioners are typically preoccupied with the bonds they share with those in their immediate community. It is when these bonds are threatened that we reach out to paranormal forces in search of support and resolution. It is in support of these relationships that we transfer blame onto outsiders, reinforcing the connections upon which we base our collective identity and eschewing those that may threaten our group identity.

Clearly, the greatest perceived threat to these communities is the disruption of established social structures. These structures are reinforced by shared beliefs, one aspect of which is faith in the existence and power of occult forces. The Xhosa of the past believed that their existence was inextricably intertwined with the existence of their cattle, and while this sounds reasonable, it proved incorrect. The Xhosa remain a powerful people in South Africa today, held together by shared norms, values, and cultural beliefs. The community endures as long as they are able to recognize their shared bonds and adapt their traditions to the pressures imposed upon them by a changing world. Occult beliefs are an integral part of the shared beliefs within many African

communities, and these beliefs themselves do adapt and modernize as part of a greater

progression toward some as yet undefined future.

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