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Living in Peril: Witchcraft Suppression in the Northern Province, South Africa in the Twentieth
Century

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the prerogatives and anxieties that underwrote twentieth century witchcraft suppression legislation in the Northern Province of South Africa. I analyze witchcraft's place in the political imaginaries of colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid states and how witchcraft suppression policies weaponized their biases. More broadly, this thesis explores the subjectivity of evil, suffering, and fear.

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Introduction

The Way of the World or The Way of Yours?

What is, after all, the driving force behind “progress” or “development”? Could it be “the market” and Adam Smith’s invisible hand, or some other similarly enigmatic notion?

– Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

British colonials, having already reduced their witches to historical debris, superimposed their blinding disbelief onto idiomatic perceptions of the occult to make Africans *see* witches as they did: history or fantasy, not reality. Writing off a danger, they could neither define nor fathom, colonial hegemony made witchcraft’s unreality legally binding. Legislation that was, for all intents and purposes, weaponized contempt attested to the fact that witchcraft was real enough for Africans that British denial needed the power of the law behind it. As the twentieth century wore on and witchcraft beliefs remained, they became, for colonial officials, the essence of African lawlessness, the reason for their lack of “progress.” In the parliamentary debates of 1935, House of Assembly Member Mr. Payne tried to impress upon his colleagues how “laws have no effect upon natives if they have the fear of witchcraft behind them.”¹ He described a case in which a witness refused to identify the perpetrator of a crime on the threat of imprisonment because “you can put me in a [jail] for seven years, but that man out there is a wizard, and he will kill me. I would sooner be in [jail] for seven years than be killed by that wizard for all my life.”² The woman, like most in official discourses – a prop used to make a point, but herself beside it – exposed the liability therein: witches were more compelling than British jurisprudence.

¹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 7th Parl. Deb. (3rd sess.) vol. 24 (2856).

² *Ibid.*

Lurking beneath the progressive overtones of the colonial lexicon was a profound anxiety about whether “those Native doctors, medicine men, and witch doctors still [have] a great deal of influence amongst the Natives?”³ Though they branded witchcraft “repugnant to the general principles of humanity,” officials also recognized that “witchcraft [was] not merely a theory of evil, but it [was] also a very specific theory of power.”⁴ A colonial catchall plucked from seventeenth-century Europe and superimposed on indigenous vocabularies, “witchcraft” was the ideal policing mechanism for a very British, very white state to repress what they could not co-opt. Based on models in Southern Rhodesia, the Cape of Good Hope, and Natal, Ordinance 26 of 1904 criminalized accusations, imputations, divinations, and the manipulation of “pretended witchcraft” or “charms” for gain in the Transvaal.⁵ Discretely tucked away under a “miscellaneous” heading within a larger compendium of “Native Affairs” legislation, its significance is easy to overlook, but its timing and tone cannot be attributed to the colonial duty alone.⁶

Still reeling after being defeated by the British, memories of Africans taking up arms against Boers forces in the South African War metastasized into a crippling racial unease in the

³ South Africa, South African Native Affairs Commission and Sir Godfrey Yeatman Lagden, *Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission with Annexures and Appendices A and B, 1903-5, 4 vols.* (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1905), 804. Hereafter all references to the “South African Native Affairs Commission” are to this document, including all annexures and appendixes that contain evidence collected and minutes of proceedings; South Africa, Government Commission on Native Law and Custom and Jacob Dirk Barry, *Report and Proceedings: With Appendices of the Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs. Presented to Both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency the Governor, January 1883.* (Cape Town, Government Printer, 1883), 15. Hereafter all references to the “Government Commission on Native Law and Custom” are to this document, including its annexures and minutes of proceedings.

⁴ Isak Niehaus, “Witchcraft, Whites, and the 1994 South African Elections: Notes on the Symbolic Constitution of Power in an Eastern Transvaal Lowveld Village,” Paper Presented to the Institute for Advanced Social Research, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, February 1995, 1.

⁵ Transvaal, *The Laws and Regulations, etc., etc., specially relating to the native population of the Transvaal* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1907), 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*

minds of the losing party.⁷ As tensions swirled around the Northern Transvaal at the start of the twentieth century, Afrikaners, outnumbered by and fearful of the ethnic majority, were desperate to take back control.⁸ That the specter of black insurrection that tormented them was “real” enough for the British to *believe* – and write into policy – despite being just as “imagined” by their “empirical” standards as witchcraft, proved how subjective the colonial “reality” could be. Ordinance 26 in 1904 was, in this context, a testament to the power of threats unseen. Fifty-three years later, against a backdrop of African militancy and a pervasive “mood of political urgency,” witchcraft “beliefs and practices” reemerged as “the outstanding problem of the lawgiver in Africa.”⁹ Although part of an onslaught of racial repression that entrenched the National Party’s authority, debates on the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 carried a distinct air of urgency.

For the ostensibly all-powerful state, the “belief” in an invisible, sinister entity that had the power to compel and punish not only defied colonial laws to the contrary but was proof that they did not have the monopoly on fear. The apocalyptic tenor of Senator Pretorius’s plea for colleagues across the aisle to support the bill amidst widespread black resistance shows how threatening witchcraft beliefs appeared in the apartheid imaginary:

You will remember – I think it is but a century or so ago – what happened in the Eastern Province, when the witch-doctors saw to it that the cattle were slaughtered, the wheat destroyed and thousands and tens of thousands of Natives died of hunger – and that was all to be blamed on witchcraft.... I would point out to the hon. Senator Rubin that the Natives are very superstitious and that the danger exists for all of us – not just the natives alone, but also for the Europeans – that should a witch doctor arise who wields great influence as some have wielded influence in the past, and it is alleged that he is the reincarnated spirit of one of their forefathers who comes with the message that the White man must be driven into the sea, then they will not stop to ask whether we are Liberalists

⁷ See: Jeremy Krikler, "Social Neurosis and Hysterical Pre-Cognition in South Africa: A Case-Study and Reflections." *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 3 (1995): 491-520, www.jstor.org/stable/3788462; Timothy Lane, "Pernicious Practice": Witchcraft Eradication and History in Northern Province, South Africa, C. 1880-1930," (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1999), 133 ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ivan Thomas Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 257; William Malcolm Hailey Baron Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 295-296.

or not, they will simply kill us off because we possess a white skin which to them is the mark of Cain.¹⁰

Almost forty years after the passing of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957, and right after the “end” of apartheid, witchcraft came to the fore once more. Young male “comrades” singing liberation songs while burning elderly women alive did not bode well for the ANC’s promise of “a better life for all.”¹¹ Charged with investigating the 1995 upsurge of witchcraft violence in the Northern Province, the *Ralushai Commission* found that “the belief in witchcraft remains as prevalent as ever” and recommended they replace the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 with the Witchcraft Control Act they drafted.¹² Although the proposed broke with the legacy of non-recognition, it largely perpetuated the ethnocentrism of the former. For a neoliberal state claiming to represent the disenfranchised, it was better (for them) to let witchcraft languish in limbo and leave the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 in place than be mired in a web of constraints from which there was no escape.

In the Northern Province of South Africa, “witchcraft” does not bring out the worst in people; it reveals it. It is “the dark side of kinship,” as Peter Geschiere suggests, but also that of being.¹³ An emotionally charged evil that inhabits the most intimate of domains, it is a name for anguish. Just as “western teleological beliefs about progress, development, rationality, and modernity – those ready-made explanations for social change that provide answers to the Big Questions in life” are loaded with the hopes and fears of the believers the occult is a frame of

¹⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (725).

¹¹ “A better life for all” was one of the ANC’s campaign slogans for the 1994 election.

¹² N.V. Ralushai, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province of the Republic of South Africa: To His Excellency the Honourable Member of the Executive Council for Safety and Security, Northern Province, Advocate Seth Nthai* (South Africa: N.P, 1996). Henceforth referred to as “Report of the Ralushai Commission.”⁵⁶

¹³ Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 4.

reference.¹⁴ It is a means of decoding the indecipherable and seeing the malice that underlies sincerity. Where witchcraft is the recognition and more often the exploitation of vulnerability, witch killings and suppression are attempts to manage it. In the fraught, liminal spaces that emerged during drastic, often disappointing political transformations, stability, for rulers and the ruled was tenuous, and suppressing witchcraft beliefs was a means of taking back control over shaky realities. Witchcraft suppression legislation was for the colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid states, a fear response. Regardless of how unbelievable they thought it, “beneath the normative rhetoric of law and good government lay a determination to ensure that rival sources of power and authority would be subordinated or eliminated.”¹⁵

Sources and Methodology

Studies of witchcraft suppression on the African continent are, inexorably, tethered to those of statecraft, the politics of racial difference, and evil. Peter Geschiere’s *The Modernity of Witchcraft* provided the theoretical basis for studying sorcery and modernity as interlocking discourses, rather than opposite ends of the developmental binary. Based on his work with the Maka in Cameroon, Geschiere argues that witchcraft is “a form of political action,” a way of interpreting and challenging the evils of an authoritarian regime, neighbors, and, especially, loved ones that thrive amidst the inequalities and disenchantments of modernity.¹⁶ Crucial for my study is his claim that witchcraft “creates a space, imaginary or not that is beyond the state’s authority” and is “the shadow of politics, always there but hard to grasp.”¹⁷ This thesis explores how this notion relates to Jean and John Comaroff’s suggestion that the “subversive poetics” of

¹⁴ Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders “Magical Interpretations and Material Realities: An Introduction” in *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. By Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, 19.

¹⁵ Richard D. Waller, "Witchcraft and Colonial Law in Kenya." *Past & Present*, no. 180 (2003): 241-175, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600744>, 260.

¹⁶ Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, 9.

¹⁷ Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, 99, 95.

witchcraft proliferate during sociopolitical “rationalization” and that “witches are modernity’s prototypical malcontents.”¹⁸ I build upon these conceptual frameworks to examine the prerogatives and anxieties that underwrote witchcraft suppression legislation in South Africa throughout the twentieth century.¹⁹ While I focus primarily on what becomes the Northern Province, given that the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was a national policy, my discussion of the apartheid period pertains to South Africa more broadly.

It does *not* go without saying, which is the problem, that any historical analysis of the subjectivity of witchcraft suppression is itself subjective. In this thesis, I read Commissions of Inquiry, Reports of the Department of Native Affairs, Senate and House of Assembly Debates to see how, when, and why contexts officials discussed witchcraft. I explored the subtext of witchcraft suppression policies, the emotions and expectations that went into policy discussions, and official discourses, as well as their afterlives. I considered the implications of who and what states left out, the gendered and racialized gaps in their narratives, and how officials made their beliefs normative. I read into them, into their silences, and their biases, and in so doing, I show not only what officials said about witchcraft but what I *believe* they meant. It would be disingenuous, and antithetical to my aims, to suggest that this historical analysis is “objective” when “witchcraft” is far from it.

This study is an outsider’s perspective, but one that I hope points to alternative trajectories, to other ways of grappling with histories of suppression, witchcraft violence, and fear. While never able to emphasize completely with that which exists outside of my own experiences, and subject position, I explore ways to commiserate. Witchcraft is not just about

¹⁸ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, eds. “Introduction,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xii, xxix.

¹⁹ The Northern Transvaal became the Northern Province in 1994.

magic, but about violence, pain, fear, and betrayal. The emotions it provokes and speaks to can be appreciated and analyzed within their contexts. This thesis is intended to give a glimpse of witchcraft's often ambivalent place in the political imaginaries of the twentieth century, to see how witchcraft suppression was related to the manifestation and management of precarity. This analysis is not meant to be the final word on witchcraft suppression, but an exposition on how it was, for states, a way of speaking *their* truth and imposing it.

Chapter 1 considers how Ordinance No. 26 of 1904 was prompted by and an expression of the sociopolitical exigencies of the post-war environment in the Northern Transvaal during the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 explores how the apartheid state envisioned witchcraft in the context of mounting black resistance and how its suppression was related to racial domination. Chapter 3 examines witchcraft beliefs and violence in the *Ralushai Commission*, the significance of its recommendations, and the ANC's inaction. As Adam Ashforth notes, "with witchcraft, as with all radical evil, there is no middle ground: you are either for the witches or against them, there can be no compromise."²⁰ There is power in the word, itself a linguistic imperialism, and the practice that speaks to how the modalities of life, power, and fear collide. This thesis seeks to show how states dealt with witchcraft in the twentieth century, and the dangers of the intangible, of acting against, and with fear. The way states imagined, sensationalized, and tried to eliminate witchcraft speaks to their sense of self, into whom they believed themselves to be – the tamers or the tamed. But this was, and remains, an artificial binary. "Witchcraft" does not exist in a singular configuration and suppressing as if *it* does only amplifies the danger therein.

²⁰ Adam Ashforth "An Epidemic of Witchcraft? The Implications of AIDS for the Post-Apartheid State." *African Studies* 61, no. 1 (2002): 121-143, doi:10.80/00020180220140109, 137.

Chapter 1

Never Fear, the British are Here: Witchcraft Suppression in the Early-Twentieth Century

In June of 1904, the scorched countryside of the Northern Transvaal smoldered anew with whispers of black revolt. In the thrall of post-war fever, skittish Afrikaner landowners, “in much the same way that an individual having repressed facts uncomfortable to the ego succumbs to a neurotic condition,” saw a black threat on every horizon.²¹ “Africa for Africans,” the credo of the black separatist church movement, took on menacing connotations for “an ethno-class” so recently “brought to the edge of utter destruction” and rumors – “than whom no evil thing is faster” – reigned.²² In the clutches of an imagined peril, rural landowners sought refuge with British administrators, their wartime adversaries, ironically, turned white saviors. Compelling as the delusion was, with no rebellion to be found, the episode was chalked up to the excitability of a post-conflict populace and the machinations of Offy Shepstone, the resident boy who cried black mutiny in the Northern Transvaal.²³ Although “the Great Fear of 1904” was, officially, a false alarm, the threat *felt* real, and the fear that it could materialize at any moment continued to plague the white psyche, perhaps even more vividly than before.²⁴

Colonial administrators did not need to see an African revolt in the Northern Transvaal, or indeed, look far beyond their borders to fear one, the First Chimurenga of 1896 in Southern Rhodesia, left them thoroughly rattled. Memories turned nightmares of spirit mediums’ “striking gifts of personality and prophecy,” and conniving “witch-doctors” tormented colonizers long

²¹ Krikler, “Social Neurosis and Hysterical Pre-Cognition in South Africa,” 510.

²² Ibid; Virgil, quoted in Rosalind Morris “*The Mute and the Unspeakable: Political Subjectivity, Violent Crime, and ‘the Sexual Thing’ in a South African Mining Community*” in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, ed. by Jean Comaroff, and John L. Comaroff, 57-101: (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 77.

²³ Krikler, “Social Neurosis and Hysterical Pre-Cognition in South Africa,” 508; Lane, “Pernicious Practice,” 501.

²⁴ Ibid.

after the conflict ceased.²⁵ The apocalyptic tenor of the uprising and the rebels' devotion to overturning white rule "[shook] both white prestige and Shona society to their foundations."²⁶ The fear that "the handful of whites might be swept away by the flowing tide of savagery" made the "black foes" a threat to all of white South Africa.²⁷ Although the British were victorious, the scale and intensity of the revolt was a blow to the colonial ego, as exemplified by Lord Grey's sullen meditation that "I may have taken up a burden I may not have the strength to carry."²⁸ In the months following the end of conflict, white fright consumed the rural districts and chipped away at an already fraught sense of security. Much like those that would plague the Northern Transvaal a few years later, their fears were hazy, but desperate and unshakable. The crippling disempowerment that came with vastly underestimating their enemy left white Rhodesians on edge and eager to "fight back" against a threat that they could neither see nor escape, ironically, much like the witchcraft "believers" they found so unreasonable.

The interplay between Afrikaner post-war anxieties and colonial unease about the uprising so close to home as well as the memories it evoked of "witch-doctors" in the Xhosa Wars fifty years prior chanting "Africa for the Africans" and "[providing] medicines and schemes by which the white man should be driven into the sea" took on nightmarish proportions in the early twentieth century.²⁹ After the racial panic of 1904, threats imagined, remembered, and real "spilled over into the sort of witchcraft-driven disobedience that the state could not ignore."³⁰ Mindful of the dangerous cocktail of supernatural influences and African dissent, one

²⁵ T.O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia: A Study in African Resistance, 1896-7* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1993), 213.

²⁶ Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, 226.

²⁷ *Cape Times*, June 30, 1896, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/apps/readex/doc>.

²⁸ Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, 127.

²⁹ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume IV: Minutes of Evidence, 560.

³⁰ Katherine Luongo, *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26.

month after the would-be black rebellion, British administrators passed the strictest witchcraft prohibition of all the colonies in South Africa.³¹ Drawing from Southern Rhodesia's Witchcraft Suppression policy, under Ordinance 26 anyone that "pretended" to use witchcraft or supernatural powers for gain or solicited "witch-doctors" was subject to one year of imprisonment with hard labor; any person that accused another of practicing witchcraft faced up to five years imprisonment with hard labor; those that supplied "pretended means of witchcraft" or used "witch medicine with intent to injure" was subject to ten years of imprisonment with hard labor, and "witch-doctors" that professed "a knowledge of so-called witchcraft" were liable upon conviction to imprisonment for life with hard labor.³²

The British entered the twentieth century wary of the interlocking nature of magic, sorcery, and political authority in precolonial societies and were eager to eliminate any threats that could not be left to the winds of time or change. The power of witchcraft "beliefs," that drove people to accuse and kill those closest to them, physically and otherwise, threatened to unravel the social fabric. It muddled uncomplicated stereotypes of submissive women that deferred to masculine authority and families that put blood above all. For British "civilizers," it poisoned everything it touched. Witchcraft, with all its subversive tendencies, was too volatile to be put on the Christianizing backburner, especially in the "the last frontier of white settlement."³³ The fierce and prolonged resistance of the northern districts of the ZAR during the South African War made regularizing "native" policy, particularly establishing and maintaining law and order, paramount for the Native Affairs Department (NAD) in the Northern Transvaal.³⁴ Post-panic, the suppression of witchcraft, quite like the work of witches and their accusers, arose out of a sense

³¹ Lane, "Pernicious Practice," 113.

³² Transvaal, *The Laws and Regulations, etc., etc., specially relating to the native population of the Transvaal*, 151.

³³ Lane, "Pernicious Practice," 4.

³⁴ Lane, "Pernicious Practice," 113.

of precarity. NAD officials targeted the shadowy power of the occult and those that wielded it to take control of an imagined, and historically lethal, threat. It was a means of laying down *the law* in front of both a nerve-wracked white populace and a potentially mutinous African population.

Administrators in the Northern Transvaal saw *dingaka* – stripped of their “vitaly important role as healers, bone-throwing diviners, and ritual specialists” and contemptuously reduced to “witch-doctors” – as the primary instigators of witchcraft violence, who “knowing perfectly well that they [were] imposing on the credulity of the ignorant people with whom they [were] dealing” wielded their clout for gain.³⁵ In pre-colonial polities, *dingaka* often worked in conjunction with, or at the behest of chiefs as one of “key intermediaries between the mundane spheres of daily life and the invisible domains of ancestral spirits.”³⁶ Their ability to see witches, while everyone else could only feel, and fear them, made them key figures in local political terrains, and a target of colonial ire. “Punishment is directed above all, at the potentially guilty” and Ordinance 26, more aptly described as the “suppression of the suppression of witchcraft legislation” was a cease and desist warning meant principally for *dingaka* and those that acted on their directives.³⁷ The heavy-handed approach of the Transvaal NAD to “weaning the Natives from faith in witch-doctors, diviners or soothsayers, or men who profess to have supernatural power” reveals how the racial panic stoked underlying fears about witchcraft’s instrumentality.³⁸

While “the assimilation with ordinary colonial law” was the “ultimate goal” for administrators in the early twentieth century, it was a long-term outcome, and witchcraft needed

³⁵ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 416; Isak Niehaus with Elizaar Mohlala and Kally Shokane, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (Cape Town: David Phillip): 26. *Dingaka* is the plural of *ngaka*, for occult healers in the Northern Sotho dialect.

³⁶ Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 252-253.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 108; Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, 253.

³⁸ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 54.

to be contained in the meantime.³⁹ The report of the *South African Native Affairs Commission*, of 1903-1905, acknowledged that the “great powers of Christianity and education [were] at work” but that the “long trek from barbarism to civilization” was indeed long.⁴⁰ Commissioners were confident that they would prevail in the “great struggle between the powers of good and evil, of light and darkness, of enlightenment and ignorance” as long as they stayed the gradual, course.⁴¹ The fact that Native Administrators in the Transvaal opted for the brute force of the law instead of this patient path to enlightenment speaks to the strength of residual and neurotic fears about a supernaturally charged black revolt and how compelling fear could be, even when, by their own assertion, there was nothing to fear. “To avoid the evil already looking in the distance,” in this case, *dingaka* heralding the end of white days, it seemed more important to make haste than progress.⁴²

Whitewashing Witchcraft

Witchcraft was, and remains, entrenched in local landscapes of power, and the suffering and evil therein, but, is also, inescapably intimate. It inhabits the boundary between the public and private, where the personal becomes, often dangerously, political. It is a salient discourse for making sense of the incomprehensible and devastating forces of life, but, as Jean and John Comaroff point out, “witchcraft is not simply an imaginative ‘idiom.’ It is chillingly concrete; its micropolitics all too real.”⁴³ *Moloi*, broadly denoting “witches” that inherit supernatural capacities and malicious intentions from their mothers, are so fearsome, their attacks so

³⁹ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 44.

⁴⁰ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 4: Minutes of Evidence, 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 94.

⁴³ Comaroffs, “Introduction,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, xxvii.

devastating because they are “insiders.”⁴⁴ The threat of witchcraft comes from within communities, homes, and families, and makes them perilous places instead of safe havens. Living with the knowledge that those you love or live with might want to curse you casts the perils of domesticity in a new, more menacing light, where the enemy could be much closer than you think. Although the full range of motives behind witchcraft accusations cannot be captured here, generally, they reflect a sense of powerlessness following a reversal of fortunes or circumstances that disrupts individual expectations and, or, social norms.⁴⁵ Far from static or ahistorical, accusations are born of the perils of the moment. In short, they explain and contain suffering. Eliminating the source of one’s misfortune is empowering for the accuser – and typically less so for their adversary – because accusations have a social and political valence that is both deeply personal and powerful. In local and national political arenas, just as in households, witchcraft accusations were instrumentalized in power struggles, and acted as “a currency of conflict.”⁴⁶

The colonizers saw it differently, or rather, they only saw “believers” driven to violence by macabre superstitions. Their position, as articulated by the *Government Commission on Native Laws and Customs*, of 1883, was that witchcraft beliefs and practices were not only absurd but also “utterly subversive to justice.”⁴⁷ For the British, the war on witchcraft had been waged and won centuries ago. The task at hand was to instill, or impose, the civilized principles that liberated Englishmen from their urge to burn and believe in witches upon those who wandered in the darkness still. In his testimony before the commission, Reverend Richard Brit

⁴⁴ Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics*, 25, 2. For further reading on *moloi* and *dingaka* see: Isak Niehuas “Witchcraft and the South African Bantustans: Evidence from Bushbuckridge,” *South African History Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): 41-58. doi:10.1080/02582473.2012.640829.

⁴⁵ See: Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics*.

⁴⁶ Peter Delius, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Portsmouth: Ravan Press), 203.

⁴⁷ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 15.

remarked that “what he [the African] considers to be the antagonist of witchcraft we consider to be the essence of it.”⁴⁸ His insight catches at the crux of the problem: the guilty party, the victim, and the crime differ based on where you are standing in relation. With witchcraft, positionality is everything. The British had no reason to fear witches, as their frequent use of “so-called” and “pretended” suggest, they – no longer – entertained such fantasies, but, became painfully aware throughout the twentieth century, that living amongst and controlling those that did could be just as perilous.

Evil may be subjective, but colonial law, in all its civilized glory, was far from it. Illegible to a “white law [that] contained the core of historical rationality,” in addition to its own superiority complex, witchcraft was written off as “nonsense” that failed to meet the threshold of believability.⁴⁹ The colonial legal paradigm was predicated on the unequivocal; it was not equipped for witchcraft, which “easily [eroded] all such comfortable conceptual distinctions.”⁵⁰ When asked what evidence was typically used to support witchcraft accusations, a witness testifying before the *Commission on Native Laws and Customs* said: “their evidence of witchcraft is not what we consider evidence, nor what they themselves would consider evidence in any other case but witchcraft.”⁵¹ Indeed, it is not surprising that officials did not see much, if any, gray area with a dead “witch” and an unrepentant assailant. However, witchcraft suppression was far more than just the routine persecution of a “custom.” Colonial non-recognition, which criminalized indigenous worldviews without using their terminologies, invalidated Africans’ understandings of the world and their ability to cope with it. It “set moral

⁴⁸ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 216.

⁴⁹ Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture*, 33.

⁵⁰ Peter Geschiere, “Witchcraft and the Limits of the Law: Cameroon and South Africa. In *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, edited by J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 219-47 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 224.

⁵¹ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 216.

worlds into collision and opposed two different rationalities and the systems of jurisprudence each one supported.”⁵² The heated exchange that followed members of the *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom* asking an African witness, with all the righteous indignation they could muster, “don’t you think that this [witchcraft] is all nonsense?” speaks to this.⁵³ It is not just that the evidence presented, in this case, a portion of the victim’s blanket in the possession of the accused and a full confession, failed to meet their burden of proof but that nothing witchy ever could.

Instead of wading through the “precariousness of all conceptual distinctions – notably that between witch and healer,” colonial officials flattened their unclarity into something more suppressible.⁵⁴ In the Northern Transvaal, witchcraft was, and remains, more akin to a type of “social diagnostics” a way of being in a world with witches, than a “belief” in them.⁵⁵ The British refused to entertain, let alone enter, this “realm of transcendent realities” where witches, quite like their almighty God, were felt but not seen, and where witchcraft was “both totally secret and yet utterly commonplace.”⁵⁶ They viewed the occult in South Africa “through the prism of a particular European historical experience” and, in so doing, distorted and sensationalized indigenous perspectives into a simulacrum of “beliefs and practices” that meshed with their civilizing ambitions and the assumptions therein.⁵⁷ Thus, in many ways, the production of state knowledge on witchcraft was also the production of “witchcraft” itself.

⁵² Waller, “Witchcraft and Colonial Law in Kenya,” 248.

⁵³ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 88.

⁵⁴ For an extended discussion on the translatability of local terminology in witchcraft discourses, see Adam Ashforth “Of Secrecy and Commonplace: Witchcraft in Soweto,” *Journal of Social Research*, vol 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996).

⁵⁵ Moore and Sanders, “Magical Interpretations and Material Realities,” 4.

⁵⁶ Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*, 114; Adam Ashforth, “Of Secrecy and Commonplace: Witchcraft in Soweto,” *Journal of Social Research*, vol 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1195.

⁵⁷ Moore and Sanders, “Magical Interpretations and Material Realities,” 4.

With sweeping generalizations, loaded questions, and racist stereotypes colonial officials – the collective white male voice of reason – reduced kaleidoscopic power relations and perspectives, in all their hazy complexity, to “grossly immoral customs” that only a civilizing example and a Christian catharsis could banish.⁵⁸ They imposed a hollow terminology, and understanding, inflected with their biases onto “indigenous grammars of power and authority.”⁵⁹ Loaded with historical baggage, witchcraft, a whitewashed misnomer, was a weapon of the colonial lexicon, a means of writing off the occult and the Africans who believed in it. Equally ludicrous in the eyes of their white beholders, witchcraft, sorcery, the occult, magic, witch-doctors, diviners, and medicine men were often conflated and confused by administrators trying to cover the bases of what they knew not. Devoid of nuance and ripped from its context, “witchcraft” was conjured from fever dreams of early modern witch burnings that haunted the colonial psyche, a fetishized fantasy of the “custom of darkness” in the “dark” continent from its fiercest nonbelievers.⁶⁰

Witchcraft and the Civilizing Mission

While the “self-confident rationality” of colonial officials is perhaps nowhere more glaring than their categorical denunciation of witchcraft beliefs, their contempt was no match for their fear of the unknown.⁶¹ The fear factor should not be underestimated. Witchcraft was a blindspot that administrators knew, firsthand, they could not afford to leave exposed, but, as the *South African Native Affairs Commission* noted, it was also “so interwoven with the social conditions and ordinary institutions of the Native population” that it could not be carelessly

⁵⁸ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 2: Minutes of Evidence, 205.

⁵⁹ Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power, and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 164; Alan R. Booth “European Courts Protect Women and Witches’: Colonial Law Courts as Redistributors of Power in Swaziland 1920-1950,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, (June 1992): 253-275, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637268>, 265.

⁶⁰ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 2: Minutes of Evidence, 202.

⁶¹ Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics*, 187.

“swept away.”⁶² While some “Native” laws and customs met the threshold of colonial approval, albeit, after a thorough whitewashing, colonial officials could not grasp, let alone, appropriate witchcraft. To those who were “authorized to speak on the Native Question: that is, to speak of, for, and to the Natives” the “tribal system [was] not a good one as far as witchcraft [was] concerned” because, “pretended” as it may have been, it was formidable, and the chiefs and *dingaka* that presided over it, were equally so.⁶³ “Leery of the potential for societal mischief posed by any spiritual powers it could not control” the British attacked witchcraft beliefs and practices with “lawfare – the resort to legal instrument, to the violence inherent in the law, to commit acts of political coercion, even erasure.”⁶⁴ Putting witchcraft under new, white, management essentially “gutted the essence of chiefly powers...attacking the basis of their alleged supernatural powers by criminalizing both the practice and the imputation of witchcraft.”⁶⁵ Dragging its adjudication from the shadows of chiefly domain into the purview of magistrates was a salient power play even if just a rhetorical one in some quarters.⁶⁶

In the carefully constructed narratives weaved by commissioners, “Africans were now, it seemed, where Englishmen had once been, and it was easy to construe an alien present...from a familiar – if largely misrepresented – past.”⁶⁷ Tales of witchcraft and woe, recounted in gory detail by the same witnesses who could barely muster a sentence for the nuances of indigenous cosmologies, were “the nodal point around which debates about the inherent irrationality of

⁶² *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 56, 44.

⁶³ Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 26; *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 3: Minutes of Evidence, 622.

⁶⁴ Booth “European Courts Protect Women and Witches,” 265; Comaroffs, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony,” 31.

⁶⁵ Booth “European Courts Protect Women and Witches,” 274.

⁶⁶ This thesis is not interested in the extent to which witchcraft suppression policies were enforced, or not, but what prompted and was written into them. For an analysis of the implementation of witchcraft suppression in the Northern Transvaal and elsewhere see Lane, “Pernicious Practice”; Booth “European Courts Protect Women and Witches”; Niehaus “Witchcraft and the South African Bantustans: Evidence from Bushbuckridge.”

⁶⁷ Waller, “Witchcraft and Colonial Law in Kenya,” 256.

Africans could gyrate.”⁶⁸ The refusal of an African witness testifying before the *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom* to “see it is a dangerous thing to have witch doctors about who can cause the death of a man by producing a piece of blanket” became his inability to see “reason” at all, and the perfect example of how witchcraft beliefs, and believers, would only respond to force.⁶⁹ Armed with “tropes of self-congratulatory discourses of progress and enlightenment,” witchcraft, in the ethnocentric light cast by colonial officials, became “what made the ‘Native’ a ‘Native,’ and, ergo, unfit to rule themselves.”⁷⁰

Graphic anecdotes of alleged “witches” being brutally murdered “reinforced the view that Africans were not only superstitious and violent but were legally irrational in crucial respects.”⁷¹ Similarly, racist tropes of *dingaka* acting as agents of chaos and riling the uncivilized masses into an uproar “displaced the blame for the violence of conquest from the colonial states to the ‘benighted’ Africans who made witchcraft accusations against one another.”⁷² By stressing the brutality of witchcraft violence officials were able to gloss over the encroachment of an indirect ruler “into the quotidian lives of African communities.”⁷³ In the colonial imaginary, the civilizational divide witchcraft embodied, and magnified, was also racialized. The policing of witchcraft beliefs and violence was, in this sense, also that of moral and political boundaries, of belonging and personhood that reflected a growing concern with the perils of interracial proximity.

“Saving” Women from Themselves

⁶⁸ Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture*, 245.

⁶⁹ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 89.

⁷⁰ Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 80.

⁷¹ Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture*, 325-326.

⁷² Lane, “Pernicious Practice,” 112.

⁷³ *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 34; Lane, “Pernicious Practice,” 157.

In the majority of official discourses in the early twentieth century, women were shadows, the *other* gender, either up for grabs or debate, overly sexualized, and demonized in the minds and plans of men. Perhaps the most poignant example of women's "non-performative" inclusion comes from Theophilus Shepstone – colloquially known as "the father of whiteness" – who responded to the question about whether "women like a custom which ignores them" with "they are born into that condition, and it seldom occurs to them that they are ignored."⁷⁴ Where there were women, there were silences about, and of, women. Their ambiguous representation in colonial discourses, if there was any at all, raises challenges for how we understand gender and the problem of witchcraft. When reading through the silences of histories – heavy on the *his* – one runs the risk of conjuring instead of analyzing them. Nonetheless, it seems far more perilous to perpetuate colonial occlusions or to take what was given without considering what was not.

Here, I analyze two striking portrayals of women in connection with witchcraft in official discourses from the early twentieth century. These fragments give a glimpse into how malleable women were in the colonial imaginary and how they were made into problems, martyrs, or excuses. To prove how "extremely ludicrous" the Bapedi peoples' belief in witchcraft was Native-Sub Commissioner C. L. Harries recounted a case where a young woman, whose fear of the occult "preyed upon her mind and led to her superstition overcoming her," believed that a man she rejected used a butterfly to administer his "love-philtre" and compel her affections.⁷⁵ According to Harries, even after they dismissed the witchcraft accusation, "there was no appealing to the common sense of the parties concerned" who insisted that "the supposed evil

⁷⁴ Sara Ahmed, "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Meridians* 7, no. 1 (2006): 104-26. www.jstor.org/stable/40338719, 104; *Government Commission on Native Law and Custom*, Volume 1: Minutes of Evidence, 1; Thomas McClendon, "Coercion and Conversation: African Voices in the Making of Customary Law in Natal" in *The Culture of Power in South Africa: Essays on State Formation and the Political Imagination* ed. Clifton Crais (Portsmouth: Heinemann), 49.

⁷⁵ C. L. Harries, *Notes on Sepedi Laws and Customs: Compiled for the Native Affairs Department of the Transvaal* (Pretoria: The Government Printing and Stationary Office, 1909), 74-76.

effects of the butterfly” were at work.⁷⁶ So desperate to resolve the case, he “was obliged to pretend” he broke the spell to placate the family.⁷⁷

Harries later states that this was “a very ridiculous episode, and hardly worthy of record, but it serves to show how far superstition is likely to influence a native in matters of this nature.”⁷⁸ This anecdote, and the fact that it merited inclusion even if only to amuse its “rational” readership, shows how women were perceived as the most susceptible to the influence of the *dingaka*. They were the weak links. Harries’s remark that “women are held under the sway of ultra-tribal ideas and are more tenacious in clinging to their customs, habits, and traditions handed down by their forefathers than are the men whose views are gradually becoming broadened” reinforced this view that “superstitions caused [them] to become hysterical” and women – “perpetual minors” in codified customary law – would fall apart without colonial intervention.⁷⁹ At the confluence of sexist and racist stereotypes, was the caricature of a woman who swallowed butterflies and believed herself bewitched.

In sharp contrast to the naïve cliché Harries painted, a witness testifying before the *South African Native Affairs Commission* outlined a case where several of a local chief’s wives accused another of witchcraft and, in the throes of jealous rage, brutally murdered a male visitor.⁸⁰ It is important to note that the witness did not go into the particulars of the accusation and how it led to a stranger’s murder, nor did the commissioners ask. Given how thoroughly they interrogated others on matters relating to witchcraft, this was a curious departure. Though stingy with the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ This thesis does not examine the supernatural powers white officials were believed to manipulate, for additional reading on that topic see: Sean Redding, *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power, and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880-1963*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power, and the Political Imagination in South Africa*; Niehaus, “Witchcraft, Whites, and the 1994 South African Elections.”

⁷⁸ Harries, *Notes on Sepedi Laws and Customs*, 76.

⁷⁹ Harries, *Notes on Sepedi Laws and Customs*, I, 3.

⁸⁰ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 3: Minutes of Evidence, 128. The witness noted that this case was similar to another high-profile incident in Swaziland.

details, Mr. H.C. Konch revealed that one of the preferred methods for punishing men in the territory was to “spread-eagle him and batter his private parts with wooden sleeping pillows.”⁸¹ The mental image of a man, and his manhood, pummeled to death by women stunned the commissioners to such an extent that they asked him to confirm they had heard correctly, that “the women do that,” that they were capable of such gender-norm defying violence.⁸² The notion of women un beholden to masculine authority, not to mention blatantly violating colonial witchcraft prohibitions, was jarring for administrators whose “alliance of patriarchies” was a, if not the central feature of their administrative schema.⁸³

Female victims of witchcraft violence were sympathetic figures, the handmaidens of death described by Mr. Konch, less so. The plight of the suspected witch was compelling to British audiences because, in their eyes, it was uncomplicated, they knew – with the self-assurance enlightenment brought – that witches were not real, and that those accused, and killed, for being so were the victims of wanton violence. Dead “witches” were the perfect props for administrators to justify colonial intervention and supremacy, acting as the literal body of proof for how “utterly subversive of justice” witchcraft beliefs were.⁸⁴ The woman in Sub-Native Commissioner Harries’s passage fulfilled a similar role. She was too irrational for her own good. Making her a damsel in distress whose “superstitions” were stoked by *dingaka*, also made witchcraft suppression the only thing that could “save” her. On the other hand, the women in Mr. Konch’s tale were evidence that witchcraft eradication was unproductive. Not only were they undeterred by the legal penalties of their actions, but they displayed an incredible capacity and

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture*, 26.

⁸⁴ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 1: Report of Commission, 54.

inclination for violence that upended colonial assumptions about women and witchcraft suppression.

These opposing images of women as both the victims of witchcraft “beliefs” and violence, as well as a source of it, reflect indigenous understandings of women’s access to supernatural powers and the precarious place they occupied in rural patriarchies. Colonial suppression policies were predicated on the notion that African witchcraft beliefs and practices were intolerably barbaric, a locus of social disorder that could be prayed or studied away. They cast the women persecuted for witchcraft into a one-dimensional template of victimhood, that failed to consider how accusations and violence were grounded in recognitions of their power. The fact that women were believed to control malevolent forces was precisely what made them so vulnerable. The non-recognition of witchcraft was then the non-recognition of how anxiety, jealousy, and inequality had historically been channeled into gendered narratives of blame, and, by extension, how witchcraft suppression policies could, and often did, make women seem all the more menacing to their accusers.

Trying Times: Witchcraft and Disorder After Union

In the turbulent decades following the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the solution to the “Native” Question” became, in the words of J. B. M. Hertzog,

A definite native policy, a policy which will remove all doubt from the native mind about the position which he will hold in political society...but he will have to be told in the most unequivocal language that the European is fully determined that South Africa shall be governed by the white man, and the white man will not tolerate any attempt to deprive him of that task.⁸⁵

Contagious disease outbreaks, rapid wartime industrialization, explosive population growth, sociopolitical ferment, and the “development of race-consciousness” among black populations

⁸⁵ J. B. M. Hertzog, quoted in Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, 69.

that threatened to “become anti-European and to seek expression in action subversive of law and order” precipitated the rise of segregationist ideologies in which the “lingering idiom of benevolent paternalism [was] submerged within a more robust and purposive bureaucracy.”⁸⁶ In was in this climate of crisis, where the “shady side of native religious activity” coming to the fore was a source of anxiety and “embarrassment,” that witchcraft beliefs emerged as the universal scapegoat to “[explain] away all sorts of what could be termed ‘official misfortune’ – the inability to establish order and implement policy.”⁸⁷

In the years following the South African War, the Northern Transvaal developed a reputation within the NAD for being “seeped in Barbarism.”⁸⁸ In sharp contrast to other districts in the colony, the northern areas, particularly the Venda peoples of Zoutpansberg, were considered, “perhaps in a less diluted form than anywhere else” to be enthralled by “the primitive customs and superstitions of an aboriginal tribe.”⁸⁹ To Native Commissioners, the most glaring evidence of their state of “semi-civilization” was “the strength which he clings to his superstitions among which is his faith in witchcraft.”⁹⁰ After Ordinance 26 was passed, administrators found it easy to condemn witchcraft – with equal parts theatrics and righteous indignation – but difficult to prosecute it. In the Transvaal NAD’s progress report for 1905, the Commissioner for Native Affairs lamented how unappreciative Africans had been with the fact

⁸⁶ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs For the Years 1919 to 1921* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printers, 1922), 30, 5; Saul Dubow, “Holding ‘a Just Balance between White and Black’: The Native Affairs Department in South Africa C.1920-33.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 217-39. www.jstor.org/stable/2636744, 217.

⁸⁷ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs For the Years 1913 to 1918* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printers, 1919), 8; Luongo, *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955*, 210.

⁸⁸ Howard Rodgers, *Native Administration in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University, 1933), 22.

⁸⁹ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Native Affairs Department for the Years 1935 to 1936* (Pretoria: Printed in the Union of South Africa by the Government Printer, 1937), 9.

⁹⁰ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Native Affairs Department for the Year ended 31st December 1911* (Cape Times Limited Government Printers, 1913), 18.

that the “Government has done much on their behalf in protecting them not only against their enemies but against themselves. It is but a few years ago since they lived in a state of perpetual terror” where “barbarism in its worst form had full play: witchcraft and smelling out did their deadly work.”⁹¹ With palpable irritation, he insisted that “all that has been swept away and the natives now live under a law which admits of their progress if they are willing to progress, in putting a stop to this wild life, Government has been truly paternal.”⁹² Although officials knew that civilizing was time-consuming work, the silence surrounding the work of the *dingaka*, which was carried out “with the full knowledge of the local community” and peoples’ refusal to speak out against them under the threat of penalty “afforded an example of the hold which the witch-doctor still [possessed].”⁹³

In the report of the 1913 *Commission Enquiring on Assaults of Women*, investigators found that sexual assaults, namely “coloured” men assaulting white women, had increased throughout the union over the past decade, particularly in the Transvaal.⁹⁴ They attributed the upsurge to the lower standards of morality amongst “coloured” peoples and “native superstition,” which “plays a part in promoting the indulgence in their sexual passions.”⁹⁵ According to commissioners, *dingaka* had taken advantage of both the “primitive” urges of their countrymen, by administering “potions which have the power to make a female succumb” and women, whom they scared into sexual submission.⁹⁶ During the tuberculosis outbreak that ravaged the countryside a year later, concern about these forces intensified as “Native superstitions” made

⁹¹ Department of Native Affairs, *Annual Report by the Commissioner for Native Affairs for the Year Ended 30th June, 1905 to 30th June 1906, Transvaal* (Pretoria: Government Printing and Stationary Office, 1906).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Native Affairs Department for the Year ended 31st December 1911*, 18.

⁹⁴ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into Assaults on Women* (Cape Town: Cape Times L.T.D., Government Printers, 1913) 14.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

black patients “an almost impossible subject to deal with” and thwarted efforts to contain the spread of disease.⁹⁷ White administrators often vilified “superstitions” and *dingaka* as barriers to progress in periods of instability, but, amid intensifying industrial unrest in the 1920s, officials latched onto “superstitions” – with witchcraft as their heart of darkness – as the source of widespread social, economic, and political disorder. In a sea of chaos, the recurring image of *dingaka* and witchcraft-related unrest loomed over white administrators as proof that they were not in control, that they were in danger of losing it altogether.

Conclusion

Where witchcraft was concerned, the British found themselves uncomfortably out of their depth, not only “exposing the limits of the law” but their own.⁹⁸ They were, altogether, “unwilling to enter the semantic ground of magic” or consider any perspective other than that of “the white people who have elected to stand as sponsors for the voiceless child-races.”⁹⁹ The lines between victim and perpetrator blur considerably when reading witchcraft through its local context, but the British gaze remained fixed on their own troubled past. Their refusal to adopt another frame of reference stemmed in part from the belief that their “experience” in these matters could be applied liberally to the African landscape with equally satisfactory results.

Even though “witch doctoring [prevailed]” before and after the passing of Ordinance 26, from the outset, NAD officials and commissioners recognized that suspected witches were being exiled or “virtually boycotted” rather than killed.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the colonial preoccupation with *dingaka* in the early twentieth century owes more to the legacy of those “pretending to have

⁹⁷ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Tuberculosis Commission* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printers, 1914), 249.

⁹⁸ Geschiere, “Witchcraft and the Limits of the Law,” 223.

⁹⁹ Crais, *The Politics of Evil*, 63; Union of South Africa, *Report of the Native Affairs Department for the Years 1919 to 1921* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printers, 1922), 34.

¹⁰⁰ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 4: Minutes of Evidence, 31.

supernatural gifts” during past rebellions and the desire to eliminate competing sources of power than witchcraft violence.¹⁰¹ The fact that neither witchcraft nor its believers had been subdued by legal intimidation or “reason” decades after the passing of Ordinance 26 became a cause for concern, though not introspection, as witchcraft violence increased in rural territories throughout the twentieth century. As apartheid ideologies started gaining traction “witchcraft emerged as a touchstone in debates over larger issues of ‘custom’” and threatened to derail the “right lines” National Party leaders believed the “Native population [could] be led onward step by step in an orderly march to civilization.”¹⁰² While memories of *dingaka* at the helm of rebellions in the late nineteenth century, committing “scandalous acts” of sexual coercion during the “black peril,” and their “antagonistic” antics during disease outbreaks continued to haunt administrators, against a backdrop of widespread rebellion, the believers became the problem.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *South African Native Affairs Commission*, Volume 4: Minutes of Evidence, 560.

¹⁰² *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1932), 3 Hereafter all references to the “Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932” are to this document; Luongo, *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955*, 132.

¹⁰³ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 6th Parl. Deb. (1st sess.) vol. 13 (2643).

Chapter 2

Witchcraft Suppression and White Supremacy in the Age of Apartheid

For white administrators' witchcraft was a headache, a touch-and-go pain ignorable under most circumstances, but when tension was rife, the pressure grew unbearable. The colonial legal offensive, not unlike violence against witches, was panic-induced, an attempt to eliminate *their* – which was distinct from everyone else's – devastating evil by any means necessary. Confident that the suppression Band-Aid they applied at the start of the century would work its bureaucratic magic, witchcraft receded into the periphery, only resurfacing when they could not afford to ignore its resilience, and their failure, any longer. House of Assembly Member Mr. der Merwe's claim that witchcraft “and all the mass of primitive fears and taboos...are the real reasons for their backwardness” speaks to how malignant witchcraft became in the unflattering light of crisis.¹⁰⁴ Believing its malice leached into the very fabric of African life, suppression efforts grew even more aggressive and indiscriminate as the twentieth century wore on.

Requisitioned amidst increasing discontent with wages and living conditions in urban areas, the report of the *1930-1932 Native Economic Commission* used the “superstitious foundation” of African societies to rationalize racial domination, and the entrenchment of white power into a “modernized,” i.e., eugenically engineered, tribal system.¹⁰⁵ Commissioners suggested that the destabilizing effects of black migration into urban areas laid “fundamentally” in the reserves where the mentality was “opposed to progress, is reactionary, stagnant.”¹⁰⁶ Believing that the “fool's paradise” Africans inhabited was “diametrically opposed” to the enlightened ethos of European society, they recommended that their “anti-progressive social

¹⁰⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 7th Parl. Deb. (3rd sess.) vol. 25 (3239).

¹⁰⁵ *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932*, 3, 9.

heritage” be quarantined, lest it spread.¹⁰⁷ They displaced the suffering caused by white supremacy onto Africans’ “spiritual fiber” – corrupted as it was by witchcraft and “the false gods of barbarism” – suggesting it left them “not able to help themselves in this respect, because they are too backwards as a race, too firmly held in the grip of primitive superstition and fear.”¹⁰⁸ With their trojan horse tribal apparatus, officials made witchcraft the problem and, in so doing, gave themselves increased access and control over black populations and the subversive elements therein.

In the interwar period stopping the flow of black migrants into urban areas, and the supposed racial contamination therein was the state’s top priority, and segregation the path out of the darkness. The clashes over its implementation that dominated the 1930s and 1940s exposed the ideological fissures growing between defenders of the British liberal inheritance and Afrikaner nationalists leaning heavily towards authoritarianism. Although “the Natives of the Union were staunchly loyal” during the war, the end of conflict abroad rekindled those simmering at home.¹⁰⁹ By 1945 NAD officials found a “sullen resentment against those in authority” was “steadily manifesting itself among the urban non-European populations.”¹¹⁰ While “pent-up passions” between chiefs erupted into localized skirmishes and industrial protests became increasingly volatile, the United Party’s inability to “cure” the “problem” they “had long sought to get to the bottom of” – African “unwieldiness” – became the failure of the gradualist paradigm more broadly.¹¹¹ Feeding into white insecurities, a not so hidden hand, the

¹⁰⁷ *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932*, 12.

¹⁰⁸ *Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932*, 92, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1944-1945* (Johannesburg: Published by Authority, Bantu Press, 1946), 1.

¹¹⁰ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1944-1945*, 2.

¹¹¹ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1948-1949* (Parow: Cape Times Limited, 1950), 36; Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1945-1947* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1948), 25.

National Party spun the “general state of dissatisfaction and unrest” into a white-rule-ending threat in the 1948 election.¹¹² Pledging to “shed the ambiance of moral qualm” that paralyzed their predecessors, their fearmongering made unapologetic racial domination the lifeblood of “Native” administration thereafter.¹¹³

While for the most part, rural and urban “resistance” developed simultaneously but was ideologically distinct, in some portions of the Northern Transvaal migrant laborers fused tendrils of the nationalist fervor with local grievances.¹¹⁴ Just as it had in the wake of the South African War, the fear surrounding “*die swart gevaar* (the black menace): a sprawling black mass – disaffected, restless, and increasingly militant” was real enough that the solidarity it presupposed did not have to be.¹¹⁵ The ANC’s defiance campaign of 1951 was a testament to just how dangerous a unified ethnic majority *could* be. In the asphyxiating panic wrought by a heated political transition, white supremacy became the coping mechanism of choice. Casting themselves as the whitest of white saviors, apartheid administrators tethered their increasing authoritarianism, and legitimacy, to protecting European society from “[relapsing] into a worse barbarism and heathenism than fell to the lot of the old Bantu.”¹¹⁶

As the self-proclaimed keepers of the peace, the National Party used the “undesirable elements...threatening orderly community and spreading a feeling of tension” and “general disorder” during the early 1950s to suppress, relocate, chastise, and reinvent Africans.¹¹⁷ In the

¹¹² Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1947-1948* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Published by Authority, 1949), 36.

¹¹³ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 62.

¹¹⁴ Mager, Anne Kelk, and Maanda Mulaudzi. "Popular Responses to Apartheid: 1948–c. 1975." In *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, edited by Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson, 369-408. Cambridge History of South Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521869836.010, 382.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 154.

¹¹⁷ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1949-1950* (Pretoria: Published by Authority, Government Printer, 1950), 1.

early 1950s, increasing opposition to influx controls in urban areas and rural contestation of the NAD's agricultural betterment schemes morphed into an existential threat in the white psyche.¹¹⁸ To strongarm the malcontents back into submission, the state had to master the private domains where witchcraft reigned. Their "carceral network," where crime and punishment were the legal, and lethal, realization of apartheid's racist metric, "[did] not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there [was] no outside."¹¹⁹ Witchcraft's hidden depths, and those it brought out in women, which the state preferred to be acquiescent mediums of social cohesion not she-devils with minds and wills of their own, had to be contained. Thus, in the mid-twentieth century, witchcraft suppression was the ethnic minority's attempt to cope with, and take control of, its vulnerabilities.

Bureaucracy and Evil in the Mid-Twentieth Century

In the 1950s, chaos was catching. As early apartheid policies worked their magic, the invisible, inexplicable, and utterly destructive forces of oppression took hold. Bantu Authorities legislation and agricultural rehabilitation policies shattered an already fragile sense of socioeconomic security in the reserves and created the perfect conditions for "malicious agitators" to "[take] the law into their own hands."¹²⁰ In light of the "alarming reverses which caused serious retardation of the work of the Trust," Native Commissioners reported that "the old tribal community in most cases has not adapted itself to the new requirements of our time and is rapidly losing its grip on the people."¹²¹ For NAD officials reflecting on the state of affairs in 1950, their inability to "bring about an improvement in the mental attitude of the Natives in

¹¹⁸ Here I am referring specifically to the tenor of discussions on the subject in the *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1949-1950* (Pretoria: Published by Authority, Government Printer, 1950).

¹¹⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 301.

¹²⁰ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1950-1951*, 5, 14.

¹²¹ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1949-1950*, II.

this respect because so many of them [were] still slaves to primitive ideas and customs” underpinned the riots on the Witwatersrand and resistance to “betterment” policies in the reserves.¹²² The fact that the departmental report later confirmed that regulatory measures for “Native medicines,” and charms related to witchcraft to “meet a long-felt want” were in the works shows the witchcraft dimension therein.¹²³ Criminalized but not conquered witchcraft inhabited the “dust of events, actions, behaviors, [and] opinions” outside the state’s control.¹²⁴ With a salience and malice that rivaled apartheid’s, witchcraft beliefs were a liability the state could not afford.

Retribalization was a hard sell. Loathed by the African populations that were shoved, not so gently, out of white sight, and political opponents that found it regressive, the National Party had to prove they had the means and the will to re-establish law and order. In the mid-1950s, the NAD became its enforcer. Transforming the department into an unapologetic “authoritarian leviathan,” H.F. Verwoerd, a man who, by his own assertion, “[did] not have the nagging doubt of ever wondering whether, perhaps, I am wrong” molded it in his image.¹²⁵ As Minister of Native Affairs, Verwoerd “approached social maladies as he would a disturbed patient: a well-regulated program of behavior modification, administered by a single authority, was essential for recovery.”¹²⁶ To normalize their relentless pursuit of racial domination, and the violence therein, the department used ethnographic “knowledge” produced by and for government officials to create and exploit cultural difference.

¹²² Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1950-1951*, 6.

¹²³ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1950-1951*, 16.

¹²⁴ South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Year 1950-1951* (Pretoria: Published by Authority, Government Printer, U.G. 30, 1953), 5.

¹²⁵ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 62, 64.

¹²⁶ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 63.

In their study of “a sample Native rural area,” the *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey* of 1951 found that witchcraft, “a belief rather than a reality,” was “a very real deterrent to any display of initiative” in areas under “the full weight of tribal custom.”¹²⁷ Investigators reported that witchcraft forced Africans to be mindful of the watchful, and potentially lethal, gazes of their neighbors, and blend in to avoid suspicion.¹²⁸ While still dripping with civilized disdain, apartheid-era anthropologists approached witchcraft with more caution than their colonial predecessors. In their study of *Izangoma* Diviners, M. Kohler, and N.J. Van Warmelo advised that “the reader of these texts should refrain from saying to himself that he is reading about absurd beliefs and fictions of the primitive mind, but rather should seek to understand how that mind operates.”¹²⁹ The fact that technical “rationality” eclipsed theatrics in ethnographic inquiries on witchcraft, which was certainly no less unbelievable to the apartheid state, is a testament to how problematic it was beginning to seem.

The “very guts of [African] culture”—deadly and dark – witchcraft beliefs were the irreconcilable ethnic difference at the heart of the state’s developmental policies.¹³⁰ The *Tomlinson Commission* of 1955 reported that the “high Christian way of life” was inundated by “widespread paganism.”¹³¹ Adamant that the “European population will not tolerate any conduct which may endanger the foundations on which its continued existence depends,” it called on the higher power(s), of God and government, to “make a clean sweep of the bad conditions now

¹²⁷ Monica Wilson, Selma Kaplan, Theresa Maki, Edith M. Walton “Vol. III: Social Structure” in *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, Volumes 1-4*. ed. by R. Lindsay Robb, National Council for Social Research (Shuter and Shooter, 1952), 186.

¹²⁸ Wilson, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, Volumes III: Social Structure*, 192.

¹²⁹ M. Kohler, M.D., edited and translated in collaboration with N. J. Van Warmelo, *The Izangoma Diviners: Ethnological Publications Vol. IX, Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs* (Pretoria: Union of South Africa Government Printer, 1941), 5.

¹³⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates, S, 6th Senate, 12th Parl. Deb. (2nd sess.) vol. 100 (2612)*.

¹³¹ *Summary of the Report of the Commission for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu Areas Within the Union of South Africa* (Pretoria: The Government Printer, U.G. 61, 1955), 154. Hereafter all reports to the “Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission” are to this document.

prevailing.”¹³² For a state that fetishized law and order above all, witchcraft believers inhabited a world “of savage passions into which the European may seldom see, a world where no police can bring order because it is one of the natives’ own making.”¹³³ Unlike the “good,” i.e., non-threatening, traditions such as “handcraftsmanship,” the “undesirability” of customs “in conflict with the Christian Religion: such for instance as witchcraft [and] ‘smelling out’ practices” made their eradication, quite literally, do or die.¹³⁴

By the mid-1950s, witchcraft suppressors had been losing for decades, and as black resistance mounted, the beliefs more than the “evil men” that preyed upon them were the problem. The common denominator between “the propelling forces which cause fermentation and frequently lead to explosion” and *dingaka* “carrying on their undesirable and politically dangerous practices under the cloak of Christianity” was witchcraft’s power of persuasion, and the violence committed in its name.¹³⁵ By taking witches out of the equation, indeed, out of existence, the “savage minds” that conjured witchcraft from whims were the only source of evil left to blame.¹³⁶ To administrators whose power rested upon an overwhelming sense of (white) frailty, witchcraft beliefs, with all their subversive predilections, were “one of the most troublesome and disturbing things that well-meaning officials [had] to contend with.”¹³⁷ They not only made it “difficult to convert recalcitrant tribal communities to a better attitude” – in which they feared white administrators, not witches – but were, in effect and practice, mechanisms of contestation.¹³⁸ The Mau Mau rebellion raging between 1952 and 1960 in Kenya

¹³² *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 17, 156.

¹³³ Kohler, Van Warmelo, *The Izangoma Diviners: Ethnological Publications Vol. IX, Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs*, 74.

¹³⁴ *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 159.

¹³⁵ *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 15, 158.

¹³⁶ Kohler, Van Warmelo, *The Izangoma Diviners: Ethnological Publications Vol. IX, Union of South Africa Department of Native Affairs*, 74.

¹³⁷ *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 175.

¹³⁸ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1949-1950*, 1.

sent shockwaves through the African continent. The “black magic” that engulfed the British colony in a torrent of death and destruction made black insurgency in South Africa all the more unnerving for the apartheid state.¹³⁹ In this context, witchcraft suppression emerged as the means of making Africans “more law-abiding,” and warding off the white nightmares come to life in Kenya.¹⁴⁰ The frantic tenor of debates on the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 shows how it was developed out of the most desperate and compelling of emotions: fear and uncertainty.

This Too Shall Pass: The Witchcraft Suppression Act, 1957

When introducing the Witchcraft Suppression Bill to the House of Assembly for discussion, the Minister of Native Affairs claimed that its “chief aim” was to standardize existing legislation across the Union and “consolidate” the English and Afrikaans translations into a single document.¹⁴¹ Not quite the *de rigueur* refresher he described, it introduced much stricter penalties and roped in the Orange Free State, where, “of course, the standard of civilization [was] much higher than in the rest of the Union,” with the rest of the witchcraft ridden territories.¹⁴² While the bill retained Ordinance 26’s basic framework it adjusted the hierarchy of punishment, combining accusers and *dingaka* – still “witch-doctors” in the dialect of contempt – into a single category with a penalty of up to twenty years imprisonment and, or, a whipping if the accused was killed, and a penalty of up to ten years imprisonment and, or, a whipping in all other cases; those that solicited a “witch-doctor or witch-finder,” professed a knowledge of witchcraft, used charms, advice or substances from a “witch-doctor” that “in accordance with such advice or his own belief, [was] calculated to injure or damage any person or thing” faced up to five years in

¹³⁹ Luongo, Katherine. "If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them: Government Cleansings of Witches and Mau Mau in 1950s Kenya." *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 451-71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20065782>, 453.

¹⁴⁰ *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 154.

¹⁴¹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (244).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

prison, and, or, a fine.¹⁴³ For those that pretended to exercise or possess supernatural power or witchcraft the new penalty was up to two years imprisonment and, or, a fine.¹⁴⁴

Fifty years after Ordinance 26 of 1904 was passed in the Northern Transvaal, administrators approached witchcraft beliefs and practices with the same stab in the dark technique, and losing streak, but shifted their focus to the beliefs themselves. The substantial reduction in jail time for *dingaka* and the fifteen-year penalty increase for accusers reveals how witchcraft suppression policies were symptomatic of the men and the moment that created them. As Senator Conradie made quite clear, the Minister of Justice's attempt to downplay the "urgent necessity in this connection" was futile; they were all well aware "of the murders committed as a result of witchery," and just as eager as he to get rid of it.¹⁴⁵ The problem, according to House of Assembly Member Dr. D. L. Smit, was that "witchcraft influences natives from cradle to the grave" and that "in practice, witchcraft has not only brought terror into the lives of individuals, but it has, in the past, had far-reaching political consequences."¹⁴⁶

For an ostensibly all-powerful state, witchcraft was unwieldy in the worst way. It was an inescapable reminder that despite their progress, and posturing, they were not in control, not completely. Giving voice to the collective unease, House of Assembly Member Shearer argued that "there is not the slightest doubt that superstition, which is revealed and comes to the surface under great emotional stress— we have seen that in the riots — a factor of the Mau-Mau affair...and also at the back of ritual murders" was the catalyst behind the present chaos.¹⁴⁷ One official's solemn meditation that "we will never get rid of witchcraft...witchcraft is getting

¹⁴³ South Africa, *Witchcraft Suppression Act, 1957* (Union Gazette Extraordinary, February 22, 1957).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (245); *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (726).

¹⁴⁶ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (246).

¹⁴⁷ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (258-259).

stronger and stronger” and “our country is becoming a witchcraft country in many ways” catches at how witchcraft beliefs were a sign and symptom of disorder in the political imaginary.¹⁴⁸

While witchcraft had long been considered poison for progress, the extent of the damage became clear as “under great emotional stress even the Bantu intelligentsia revert under the great strain to primitive behavior and thus [endangered] in addition the safety of the White people of South Africa.”¹⁴⁹

Against a backdrop of widespread turmoil, witchcraft was a political lightning rod, and debates over how and who was equipped to suppress it exposed how deeply imbricated it was with power, legitimacy, and control. Noting that his cohort of United Party members would support the bill “because the Government has brought nothing better before [them] to deal with witchcraft” House of Assembly Member Hughes claimed that “if we were in power we would sooner kill witchcraft than this government is going to do because we reason that witchcraft dies with education and civilization,” not the prequest edifice that fostered it.¹⁵⁰ While the majority of officials acknowledged the state had to take control over witchcraft, as it shattered white arrogance elsewhere on the continent, they were polarized over the apartheid state’s designs to reinstate “the tribal system in which wizards and witchcraft are the rule.”¹⁵¹

In the late 1950s, witchcraft – the last “undesirable” custom standing – threatened to make or break the new state.¹⁵² Against a backdrop of political exigency, witchcraft suppression was a legitimizing enterprise, an angst-ridden show of force intended to quell black resistance and undermine the opposition’s attacks on retribalization. For retribalization and the expansion

¹⁴⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (251).

¹⁴⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (260).

¹⁵⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (265).

¹⁵¹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (248).

¹⁵² *The Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission* refers to witchcraft as an undesirable custom, reflecting how the colonial rhetoric surrounding witchcraft changed and was retooled but the sentiment remained the same.

of administrative control therein, to succeed, witchcraft had to go. The United Party's claims that "witchcraft is basic in Bantu custom. You cannot get away from it. They believe in it, and it is the very heart of their whole tribal system" made the efficacy of their enterprise contingent on its disappearance, though not necessarily its eradication.¹⁵³ Brushing off the rather spot-on concern that "this Bill [would] just drive [witchcraft] underground," the National Party insisted that restoring the tribal apparatus, with all of its "dark spots" expunged, was the only way to facilitate the "right type of progress."¹⁵⁴ The feverish intensity with which they defended the act attests to how overwhelming the threat and their fear of it had become.

Though legislators came armed with their preconceptions, and some even the *Encyclopedia of Superstitions* and Shakespeare references, legislators could not settle on "what is meant by witchcraft."¹⁵⁵ Much like their forebearers, apartheid investigators pierced the surface of witchcraft beliefs in oblique and complicated ways, but witchcraft remained, very much, in the "realm of the unknown."¹⁵⁶ Perhaps it was, as the Minister of Justice suggested, "impossible" to define what was neither recognized "[nor] frequently understood by white people," but a significant distinction did emerge.¹⁵⁷ To apartheid administrators, the difference between "fortune-telling" in "perfectly harmless side-shows" and "the evils of mankind" by which "a person may be killed by the most terrible means imaginable" was black and white.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (721).

¹⁵⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (250, 256).

¹⁵⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (722). Although the Senator does not provide a reference for the "Encyclopedia of Superstitions" to which he is referring, based on the brief passage he recites it is most likely the following: Cora Linn Daniels and Prof. C. M. Stevans, PhD. et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World, A comprehensive Library of Human Belief and Practice in the Mysteries of Life Through More than Six Thousand Years of Experience and Progress*, (Milwaukee: J.H. Yewdale & Sons Co., 1903).

¹⁵⁶ Ashforth, "Of Secrecy and Commonplace," 1193.

¹⁵⁷ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (732).

¹⁵⁸ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (731); *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (246); *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (730).

Recognizing that witchcraft “is not, of course, a monopoly of the African people,” though missing the irony therein, National Party members reassured their colleagues that white residents who enjoyed the occasional séance or tourists that were “always anxious to see a witch-doctor” in all his exoticized glory “need have no fear whatsoever.”¹⁵⁹ As Senator DE Wet surmised, “the intention is clearly – the honorable Minister has made it perfectly clear – to do away with the evil within the Native territories and to break down certain Native customs.”¹⁶⁰ The thinly veiled innuendo being that no definition was necessary, just a white stamp of approval. The color line officials drew between indulging superstitions for white amusement and the “grave menace,” which “should not be allowed in a country which has a so-called high standard of civilization” speaks to how racialized witchcraft, and attempts to stamp it out, were in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁶¹

Taking on the State: Rural Women in the late 1950s

Women were absent, in every sense, from these proceedings. Mentioned only in passing, Senator DE Wet tried to give life, or in this case, death, to his claim that “the grimmest atrocities and the worst murders are committed as a result of witchcraft” by describing “a very serious case in which a boy sold his own mother for £25.”¹⁶² When another senator interrupted to ask, “wasn’t it his mother-in-law?” he pressed on undeterred with “no, it was his own mother. He sold his own mother – now I come to think of it, it could have been his mother-in-law – but be that as it may, the point was that while she was still alive, they cut certain parts of her body and bled her.”¹⁶³ It was a moot point. Her death was not about her at all, but rather the glaring social

¹⁵⁹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (722, 729, 736).

¹⁶⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (720).

¹⁶¹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (260); *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (731).

¹⁶² *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, S, 6th Senate, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 1 (724).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

dysfunction it *represented*. The image of a (very) dead matriarch was a shock to civilized sensibilities and made a compelling case for equally aggressive suppression.

Taking the *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey's* finding that “the absence of the male cannot fail to have an adverse effect,” to heart, particularly in regards to crumbling patriarchal and generational control, the apartheid state committed to salvaging the “strong element holding the social fabric together, [the] family relationship.”¹⁶⁴ Dusting off the 1905 *South African Native Affairs Commission's* recommendation that “one of the strongest forces in Native life and one which might be utilized for bringing about an improvement in their social condition is the influence of the woman,” the NAD tried to use women – as an undifferentiated gender category, ready for use – to extend their purview.¹⁶⁵ Combined with the heavy-handed enforcement of the Bantu Authorities system, the extension of pass laws to women in rural territories under the auspices of “maintaining order” was the breaking point that “propelled opposition into open rebellion in many parts of the reserves.”¹⁶⁶ Uncooperative women – every authoritarian’s worst nightmare – “armed with sticks and brimming with vitriol, attacking men and women who were identified with the new regime, and willingly disrupting their domestic duties by risking imprisonment” rattled administrators.¹⁶⁷ Accustomed to seeing women only when dead or exploitable, which was usually one and the same, here, far from the malleable mood stabilizers officials pictured, they were frighteningly real and unruly. Women’s militance forced the state to reckon with the fact that if they could be pawns, they could also be problems.

¹⁶⁴ Houton and Walton, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, Volume II*, 111; South Africa, *Summary of the Report of the Tomlinson Commission*, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Department of Native Affairs, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs for the Years 1948-1949* (Parow: Cape Times Limited, 1950), 42.

¹⁶⁶ Muriel Horrell, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1955-1956* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations), 86; Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 257.

¹⁶⁷ Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race*, 259.

The reemergence of the dichotomy of a woman scorned or slain in this context speaks to how witchcraft blinders cast a shadow on women in the political imaginary. Like witchcraft, women were discursive metaphors in discourses of men, a gauge for the state of things, and, when necessary, an excuse to intervene. In her study of the social conditions in the rural territories in the *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey* Monica Wilson found that wives, followed by mothers-in-law were most commonly accused of witchcraft, indicating that “the relations between a wife and her in-laws, with whom she lives, [were] fraught with tensions.”¹⁶⁸ As the full effects of racial repression set in during the late 1950s, villagers believed witchcraft was “more prevalent today than in the past, because of the culprit’s immunity from punishment.”¹⁶⁹ Cloaked in the disbelief and the legal defenses of nonbelievers, accused witches were “protected” from accusations but not the murderous retaliations that followed, and “for the women caught in between, the problem was to live.”¹⁷⁰ As disillusionment with apartheid policies intensified women, and witches, became the scapegoats for the devastating forces of “betterment.”

Conclusion

Conscious of the explosion brewing in the reserves, officials ignored concerns that the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 would bury the threat, not eliminate it, and went on the offensive. As the state cracked down on believers, they did the same to witches. House of Assembly Member Colonel Shearer’s claim that “unless you can eliminate superstition you will always have occasional outbursts of mob violence, and so on, motivated by primitive outlooks based on the mental foundation of primitive superstition” speaks to the sense of superiority

¹⁶⁸ Wilson, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, Volume III: Social Structure, 173.

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey*, Volume III: Social Structure, 193.

¹⁷⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 335.

behind their attempt to conquer what no (white) man had before.¹⁷¹ As the struggle for and contestation of power became more desperate in the last decades of the twentieth century, the collision between two uncompromising evils facilitated the proliferation of both.

As livelihoods, norms, and relationships crumbled in the late twentieth century, “spiritual insecurity – the dangers, doubts, and fears arising from the sense of being exposed to invisible evil forces” became unbearable.¹⁷² The “presumption of malice” where “because you know they can harm you by mysterious, unknowable means, you must presume that they will – despite appearances to the contrary or explicit denials” was amplified amidst the desperation.¹⁷³ House of Assembly Member Mitchell’s point that “we all know what Native evidence is worth in court” was quite apt.¹⁷⁴ Under white purview, even a whisper of witches was enough to make a case stillborn. Without a legitimate forum to resolve witchcraft disputes, and as evil abounded under the apartheid regime, people resorted to expelling, and more often, killing the witches they felt responsible for their suffering. At the end of the twentieth century, nowhere was the dialectic between witchcraft and white supremacy – where “the lethal and the legal animate and inhabit one another” – more brutal than the Northern Province.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 12th Parl. Deb. (4th sess.) vol. 108 (5747).

¹⁷² Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, 1.

¹⁷³ Adam Ashforth, “The Meaning of Apartheid and the Epistemology of Evil” in *Evil In Africa: Encounters with the Everyday* ed. by William C. Olsen, Walter E. A. Van Beek (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), 375.

¹⁷⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HA, 11th Parl. Deb. (5th sess.) vol. 93 (254).

¹⁷⁵ Comaroffs, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction,” 31.

Chapter 3

Which Side are You On: The Ralushai Commission and the ANC's Witchcraft Problem

Democracy was supposed to bring peace, not “cowboy-like style” stonings and witch burnings.¹⁷⁶ In February of 1990, administrators were “unable to fathom” how Nelson Mandela’s release from imprisonment coincided with and, in many ways, catalyzed a wave of brutal witchcraft violence in the Northern Province, but both were a liberation of sorts.¹⁷⁷ As black resistance, and the apartheid state’s onslaught escalated throughout the 1980s, young male “comrades” leveraged the failure of traditional, and white, authorities to manage witchcraft – a supernatural tyranny made, even more, stifling by its anonymity – for power. The rise of “people’s courts” in townships made “democracy” the singular vision of the young men that seized control in its name.¹⁷⁸ The necklacing of suspected witches in Sekhukhuneland during the 1986 national state of emergency, where comrades placed tires filled with petrol around the necks of the accused and lit them, exposed the paradoxes and multiplicities of “freedom.”

A taste of the change to come, the end of Mandela’s long walk to freedom and the unbanning of the ANC ignited the heady brew of resentment, political fervor, and masculine unease that had been building for decades. Spurred by their victory, revolutionary comrades retooled the struggle against racial oppression into the deliverance from evil more broadly, making witches public enemy number one. The apartheid state dubbed the (so-called) “protector of witches,” for its campaign against those that tried to mitigate or even acknowledge witchcraft, created the perfect conditions – conducive to suffering – for witches to thrive unchecked in the

¹⁷⁶ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 240.

¹⁷⁷ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 227.

¹⁷⁸ Mager, Anne Kelk, and Maanda Mulaudzi. "Popular Responses to Apartheid: 1948–c. 1975" in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, eds. Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson, 369-408. Cambridge History of South Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521869836.010, 382.

late twentieth century.¹⁷⁹ In this context, witch-purging was not a rogue outgrowth of the struggle against apartheid but *the* good fight itself.

Peddling witch-hunts as public catharsis, comrades used bad reputations and rumors to weed out evildoers – the devils you know – and liberate villages from their clutches. Whispers became death warrants. Magistrates reported that “even though there was no basis upon which the suspicion was based,” comrades assembled mobs to “interrogate,” usually through a trial by fire, and condemn the accused.¹⁸⁰ Reportedly gripped by an “inexplicable hysteria,” they brutally attacked suspected witches and drowned out their screams by “singing freedom songs and shouting: Viva Mandela, Viva.”¹⁸¹ In the 1990s, the fear of retaliation made prosecutors and witnesses reluctant to pursue cases against comrades. That many “[took] the easy way out by withdrawing the case against the accused” or sentenced those that killed “in the most barbaric fashion” to a few months in prison emboldened comrades and, to the magistrates removed from the immediacy of the danger, “made a mockery of the South African justice system.”¹⁸² An administrator reviewing cases of witchcraft violence from the period suggested, in no uncertain terms, that the comrades were not the only ones that “[appeared] to be lost in the maze.”¹⁸³

Though some disapproved of their methods, there was widespread participation and support for the comrades’ cause. Although men, particularly apartheid collaborators, were also targets of witchcraft violence during the early 1990s, witchcraft was women’s work. Campaigns against the evil lurking behind a female exterior were “about manhood and manliness, about the context and organization of the moral order of masculinity. At the same time, they were about

¹⁷⁹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 270.

¹⁸⁰ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 231.

¹⁸¹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 230, 250.

¹⁸² *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 57, 249.

¹⁸³ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 249.

women, or, more precisely, about the control of women.”¹⁸⁴ In the Northern Province, where “all women are the same, and all women are witches,” witch killings not only “[made] the country ungovernable” for white administrators, but also fulfilled “masculine fantasies of power.”¹⁸⁵

The early 1990s were rich with possibility but also fraught with the uncertainty it brings. While dreams of a “new” South Africa were intoxicating, the realities of charting post-apartheid trajectories with the enemy were less so. In the months leading up to South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994, it became increasingly clear that the “complete reversal of fortunes” Africans anticipated did not lie behind the forced smiles of oppressors that handed over the reins only to retreat to their parliamentary seats.¹⁸⁶ Although the apartheid state had, ostensibly, yielded to the ANC, the emergence of its “secret core of malice capable of unleashing death and destruction in the form of a third force” threatened to tank already frayed negotiations and plunge the country into armed conflict.¹⁸⁷ Not only a frighteningly effective bargaining tool, for those fighting apartheid one witch at a time, the third force was proof that evil was alive and waiting to strike.

Disappointment thrives in the shadows cast by great expectations. Just as the purges of the early 1990s were driven by a need to punish those responsible for their suffering, so too was the upsurge in witchcraft violence following the 1994 election a response to circumstances that, despite all the earth-shattering expectations surrounding liberation, were still quite bleak. Amidst the pitfalls of the triumph of democracy and its floating signifiers, unfulfilled promises turned devastatingly violent. In this context, witches were a common enemy whose elimination

¹⁸⁴ Clifton Crais, *Poverty, War, and Violence in South Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 62.

¹⁸⁵ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 270; Isak Niehaus, “Towards a Dubious Liberation: Masculinity, Sexuality and Power in South African Lowveld Schools, 1953-1999.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 387-407. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637409>, 406.

¹⁸⁶ Niehaus, “Witchcraft, Whites, and the 1994 South African Elections,” 14.

¹⁸⁷ Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, 277.

promised to deliver the paradigm shift people craved. In this sense, the “struggle” extended beyond, and in many senses escalated after it seemed that the fight had been won because the danger remained, and no one was free if witches were. Fresh off the heels of the ANC’s hard-won victory, “the world became curious about the witches of the Northern Province.”¹⁸⁸

Shortly after assuming power, the ANC appointed the *Ralushai Commission*, led by Professor of Social Anthropology N.V. Ralushai, to investigate the causes of witchcraft violence and ritual murders in the Northern Province. They were tasked with reviewing criminal cases involving witchcraft from the past decade and recommending legislative and educational measures to “combat” witchcraft violence.¹⁸⁹ In stark contrast to the “grand tradition” of white commissions, it followed, of its nine members, seven were black men. The *Ralushai Commission* was the ANC’s way of addressing, and offloading, the witchcraft problem while their constituency and international financiers were watching. Throughout the twentieth century, commissions of inquiry used the power of officialdom to produce a “reality” around a political narrative or agenda that made and unmade as it pleased. Both conceptually distinct from and agent of the state; in practical terms, commissions were only as relevant as the state wanted them to be. In this case, the *Ralushai Commission*’s recommendations were “non-performative,” a “speech act” so mired in its own significance that it *was* the action.¹⁹⁰

In the fragile liminal space where apartheid “ended,” but much remained the same, the Republic of South Africa was “founded upon a primal confusion between law and lawlessness.”¹⁹¹ By the end of the twentieth century, the ANC was well aware that witchcraft was not only hazardous in the conventional sense but perilous political terrain. They had to stop

¹⁸⁸ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 121.

¹⁸⁹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 1.

¹⁹⁰ Ahmed, “The Nonperformativity of Antiracism,” 104.

¹⁹¹ Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable,” 57.

the violence, as a “rational” state was expected to, but also distance themselves from those that categorically disregarded the needs and beliefs of the people for their own. In a moment where restoring law and order was crucial, witchcraft violence – the *wrong* type of keeping the peace – exposed the “classic conundrum of the modernist nation-state: If it presumes a unity born of a commitment to universal truths and to One Law, how much cultural relativism can it tolerate?”¹⁹²

White Lies: Witchcraft in the Ralushai Commission, 1996

In its opening pages, the *Ralushai Commission* voiced what colonial arrogance had rendered self-evident: “does witchcraft exist?”¹⁹³ While never quite settling on an answer, which is, of course, one of its own, the nuances of African cosmologies were freed from their European stranglehold and examined within their contexts. Replete with disclaimers and definitions, at first glance, the commission certainly appeared more receptive to African views than its predecessors. Its claim that “the belief in witchcraft and related practices form part of the basic cultural, traditional, customary principle of Africans in South Africa and Africa as a whole” and were “as old as mankind itself” shattered centuries of white gaslighting.¹⁹⁴ It is curious then that despite these tendrils of relativism, commissioners left witchcraft untouched. While it is possible that its currency both in and out of South Africa was preferable from a logistical standpoint, one can imagine too that they could not untangle the colonial and indigenous logics, that they could not see the occult, as it existed, from the outside looking in. Regardless, recognizing witchcraft as someone else’s reality did not make the *beliefs* any less problematic for the state. Rather than criticizing them directly, the commission hand-selected hundreds of the most “striking” cases,

¹⁹² Comaroff, John, and Jean Comaroff. "Policing Culture, Cultural Policing: Law and Social Order in Postcolonial South Africa." *Law & Social Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (2004): 513-45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4092707>, 516.

¹⁹³ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 12.

¹⁹⁴ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 57.

equal parts blood-soaked and heart wrenching, to do it for them. Giving color to the nightmarish murders it described, they even “included photographs just to show the gruesomeness and the inhuman way in which people were being murdered.”¹⁹⁵

While the sheer volume of suffering at times made it hard to hold onto to its intimacy, the *Ralushai Commission* individuated victims. There were names to go along with the pain. No longer just unclaimed remains thrown in for the shock value, stories of their deaths were also of their lives. Cutting through the distance lifeless statistics create between the reader and the deceased, the commission made it harder to dissociate the crime from the carnage. Just as theatrical, though more tactful than their predecessors, it used the dead to show just how toxic witchcraft beliefs could be. Speaking through the *Le Roux Commission* whose political incorrectness the *Ralushai Commission* could only quote, it identified ritual murder as a “fearful practice [that] stretched back into the dark and primitive past from which the majority of people are trying to free themselves today” and was “woven into the very fabric of society through the deep-rooted belief in witchcraft and the influence of the witch-doctor.”¹⁹⁶ The *Ralushai Commission*’s claim that the “belief in witchcraft plays a major role in ritual killings,” loosely identified as the murder and mutilation of innocents with the intention of using their body parts in spells, made them equally as “primitive and spine-chilling.”¹⁹⁷

In colonial and apartheid discourses, whitewashed catchalls not only masked the state’s fear but made its point of view the rule. The antithesis of objectivity, witchcraft was and is a personal hell. It uncovers and exploits the skeletons, desires, and fears buried in the recesses of one’s psyche. You see what you want or expect to and reveal a great deal about yourself in the

¹⁹⁵ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 121.

¹⁹⁶ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 271.

¹⁹⁷ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 28, 255.

process. The *Ralushai Commission* spoke for and through the people. Commissioners embedded their perspective in their “findings” at times with great subtlety. Reporting that “the overwhelming majority of the people interviewed in both urban and rural areas still believe in witchcraft,” the condescending modifier *still* showed where they thought witchcraft really belonged.¹⁹⁸ The fact that they identified witchcraft as “one of the outstanding problems of the law-giver in Africa” without acknowledging the very white mind behind the phrase attests to the ambivalent tone of the report.¹⁹⁹

When Suppression Fails: The Witchcraft Control Act

Seeing as the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was both deeply unpopular and unproductive, the *Ralushai Commission* suggested it should expire with apartheid, and drafted the Witchcraft Control Act to replace it. Under the proposed, anyone who “without any reasonable or justifiable cause” accused another of using supernatural methods to produce illness, death, or injury in another person, named another person as a witch, employed or solicited a “witch-doctor,” claimed to have supernatural knowledge, and, or capacities or implicated anyone in the death or illness of another person was liable upon conviction for up to three years imprisonment and a fine.²⁰⁰ Anyone that acted in a manner that created “a reasonable suspicion that he [was] engaged in the practice of witchcraft,” claimed a supernatural affinity or advised others on how to use occult powers, or acted on the advice of a “witch-doctor” that was “calculated to injure or damage any person or thing” faced up to four years imprisonment and a

¹⁹⁸ [Emphasis Added] *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 271. This is a phrase from Lord Hailey’s African Survey.

²⁰⁰ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 55.

fine.²⁰¹ Anyone that collected money to employ a “witch-doctor” or forced a “witch-doctor” to do their bidding was liable upon conviction for up to two years imprisonment and a fine.²⁰²

Recognizing that witchcraft beliefs survived –with *beyond their expiration date* heavily implied – and “must thus be reckoned with even in the middle of modern changes,” the commission put the law above all.²⁰³ Though claiming “there [was] no clear-cut solution for the difficulties arising out of the diversion of European and African conceptions of justice,” the Witchcraft Control Act deferred, unequivocally, to the former.²⁰⁴ Notwithstanding its recognition of witchcraft, which was more than just rhetorically significant, the proposed diluted and rebranded the ethnocentrism of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957. While cutting through some white denial, it used the same language of blame as its precursor to criminalize “witch-doctors” and occult healing. Effectively reneging on the report’s earlier linguistic relativism, the use of “witch-doctor” and all the scorn it carried in the Witchcraft Control Act suggests that the *Ralushai Commission* saw their influence as a threat to the state.²⁰⁵ Suggesting, rather bluntly, that “diviners and traditional healers must be made to taste the bitterness of their medicine,” the commission claimed that policing *dingaka* “will definitely reduce the rate of witchcraft violence.”²⁰⁶ For an extra layer of protection, it recommended the ANC create a Traditional Medical Practitioners Council to “provide for the registration and regulation” of traditional healers and monitor “improper or disgraceful conduct.”²⁰⁷

While the Witchcraft Control Act drafted by the *Ralushai Commission* broke with the legacy of nonrecognition, it also perpetuated colonial invalidation of the primary mechanism of

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 56.

²⁰⁴ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 61.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 64.

detection, the “witch-doctor.” That the commission “[came] to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of the people are for the reinstatement of the death penalty” in cases of “ritual killings and senseless witch-hunts” because the “killing of human beings is unacceptable” shows how witchcraft violence muddled morality.²⁰⁸ Here, witchcraft violence was of an entirely different class, so ghastly, it begets violence from the moral authorities on violence. Ironically, commissioners failed to see how similar their line of thinking was to those it condemned. Claiming that “the practice of witchcraft and of witch-finding do actually cause death and injury,” they sacrificed cultural relativism for what they saw as the greater good.²⁰⁹ Targeting what were, arguably, the only authorities capable of judging whether an accusation was “reasonable or justifiable” was and is a nonstarter for facilitating the nonviolent resolution of witchcraft grievances.²¹⁰ The *Ralushai Commission*’s treatment of traditional healers exposed the problem with governing witches, victims, killers, and finders: the state had to choose which crime and suffering mattered more.

Salvaging the colonial dichotomy between witchcraft and modernity, the commission recognized “two schools of thought in this area, namely those who say witches do not exist, and the ones who say witches do exist.”²¹¹ Blinded by the binary, it polarized the “traditionalists” that believed “the old order should be restored” with *dingaka* and chiefs presiding over witchcraft cases, and the “modernists (though many of them still believe in witchcraft)” that stood by the – historically fallible – model of praying and enlightening the witches away.²¹² Making the colonial progress narrative praxis, the commission claimed that “[liberating] people

²⁰⁸ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 62, 28.

²⁰⁹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 61.

²¹⁰ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 55.

²¹¹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 51.

²¹² *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 33.

mentally from participating in the killing and causing harm resulting from their belief in witchcraft” was the only way to stop the violence “resulting from their belief in witchcraft.”²¹³ Only mentioned and blamed in relation, its silence on what the state should do about witchcraft beliefs was deafening.²¹⁴

The *Ralushai Commission* was appointed to make sense of crisis in the Northern Province and find *the* solution. But witchcraft violence was tricky. Throughout the twentieth century, investigating and suppressing witchcraft embroiled the state in questions of custom, authority, and fear that forced them to reveal and do more than they wished to. The commission’s recommendation that the ANC “tread carefully on the question of the role of chiefs in witchcraft-related practices” was a testament to how precarious the politics of witchcraft was at the end of the century.²¹⁵ Capturing how commissioners wavered between what they believed the ANC needed and what would be well-received, as one official observed, “surely these facts are complicated. How do we explain this labyrinth” and, I would add, escape it? ²¹⁶

Loose Ends: Women and Witchcraft Post-Apartheid

It is easy to erase women; it did not even take the Ralushai Commission four pages. With a disclaimer that made gender interchangeable, it diminished the gendered nature of witchcraft violence. Although there are scores of women in this report, their bodies all shoved in the annexures, they are caricatures, with names but not substance. Admittedly, there was little officials could say about dead women considering it took their dying to get noticed, and by then it was already too late. Nowhere amidst all their sad ruminations did they consider or even

²¹³ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 60.

²¹⁴ Comaroffs, “Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction,” 41.

²¹⁵ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 60.

²¹⁶ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 190.

mention how tropes about “female witches, who devour the life energy of men” had long been a touchstone for patriarchal insecurity and its relation to women’s relative socio-economic empowerment in the years leading up to the 1994 election.²¹⁷ Here, as administrators looked *through* women, skipping right to the end, the two-faced paradigm of the damsel and the witch resurfaced once again.

In the evidence compiled for the *Ralushai Commission*, administrators described a case in which the insinuation of witchcraft incited an appalling level of violence from young children. In the former homeland of Venda on January 27th of 1995, thirteen-year-old Bridget left her porridge unattended in her classroom while getting a glass of water, and upon returning noticed bits of “soot-like black stuff” atop the surface.²¹⁸ To weed out the witch the instructors made the students laugh, and when Mavis, the killjoy, “did not laugh like the others” a “mob of schoolchildren,” descended upon her “without any proof whatsoever.”²¹⁹ After administrators took Mavis to the police station for safekeeping, the food was sent for forensic analysis and came out clean.²²⁰ The magistrate reviewing the case noted that “it is quite evident that from an otherwise innocent situation, a very explosive atmosphere can arise, causing a disturbance that no one even thought of. What if the little girl had been killed?”²²¹ Assuming it would be obvious which “little girl,” he was referring to, he did not bother with her name. He did not differentiate between the two girls in the story because he could not or chose not to see the double edge they represented. However, there was not just one potential dead girl; both could have been killed. Women, even the little ones, were both the killers and the killed. Like witchcraft, women were

²¹⁷ Niehaus, “Witchcraft, Whites, and the 1994 South African Elections,” 1.

²¹⁸ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 233.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 234.

liminal, present, but never quite settled. Perhaps this is why the colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid states have never known what to do with women. Recognizing that they are subject to devastating levels of violence but are also powerful, frighteningly so, would jeopardize their instrumentality.

The *Ralushai Commission* portrayed women without malice or depth and ignored how hostility towards the, emasculating, rise of female breadwinners in the decades previous was translated into violence against women, and witches. As much as the witchcraft violence of the 1990s was a moral and political emancipation, it was too a violent reinscription of masculine dominance. Throughout the twentieth century, women and witches were loose ends in states ruled by men. Two decades after the *Ralushai Commission's* publication, women murdered on suspicion of witchcraft continue to suffer in silence. That witchcraft violence “often occurs in remote rural areas and is deemed less urgent than urban-based crime such as bank robberies and car hijacks” means that the women that exist in the state’s periphery, are peripheral.²²² One of many names for femicide in South Africa, witchcraft violence is part of a broader attack on women that the ANC has yet to address. In light of increasing gender violence, the democratic state must contend with how dismissing witchcraft drags women – dead and alive – along with it.

Conclusion: When Lightning Strikes, Witchcraft in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, witchcraft suppression was damage control. For the colonial and apartheid regimes, it (over)compensated for what they could neither comprehend nor conquer, the power of beliefs that ran counter to their own. They suppressed what they *knew* did not exist, with a self-assurance reserved for white male colonials because they were tortured by all that

²²² South Africa, National Conference on Witchcraft Violence and the South Africa Commission on Gender Equality, *The National Conference on Witchcraft Violence: 6-10 September 1998* (Braamfontein: Commission, 1998), vii.

they did not. Looking at witchcraft through a Eurocentric lens, with insider knowledge of how the story “ended,” the colonial government and its successor projected their subconscious onto the South African reality. Witchcraft suppression was, in this sense, a perspective distortion. While eradication policies were, in the colonial imagination, for Africans’ own good, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 ditched the didactic and was, for all intents and purposes, a show of force. With its own Western criteria to meet, the *Ralushai Commission* warped the occult as it existed to those in the Northern Province to fit its script. Despite the commission’s lukewarm recognition, and recommendations to the contrary, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 remains in force, and the ANC has, much like its predecessors, turned a blind eye to witchcraft.

For the colonial, apartheid, and democratic states, the aporia of suppressing what they could not see was that they did so from their POV. The subtleties of witchcraft could not be grasped secondhand; the magic, so to speak, was lost in translation. Witchcraft was a simulacrum that reflected what the beholder believed. Ironically, colonial and apartheid witchcraft suppression laws were indeed tailored to something that did not exist – according to their measure of believability– in their *present* reality, but it was a threat of their own making. Equal parts historical misremembering and white fright witchcraft suppression laws were ill-equipped to eliminate occult beliefs in South Africa because they were not beliefs at all, but burdens. Ordinance 26 of 1904, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957, and the drafted but unpassed Witchcraft Control Act were not designed with the occult of the Northern Province in mind, but how it existed in the minds of the observers.

As the *Ralushai Commission* recognized, “when one starts talking about the subject of witchcraft, it follows that one has to deal with the controversy it has brought about.”²²³ An explosion of witchcraft violence right after a historic election win is a nightmare scenario for any new state, particularly one that came to power just as the revolutionary high waned. The ANC’s dilemma was not just that they faced with enormous expectations, but that they could not satisfy any without forsaking the others. Capturing the perils of representing all interests in a *modern* world of witches, Adam Ashforth argues:

It is hard to imagine that a government wishing to present itself to the world as a rational economic manager capable of satisfying the desires of international investors is going to approach questions of witchcraft publicly in any other manner than of deploring the excesses of ignorant people who punish innocents suspected of witchcraft while calling for more education to overcome ‘social backwardness.’²²⁴

How can the ANC tell citizens not to seek confirmation or retaliation when they believe they are in mortal peril? How can they hope to distinguish themselves from white suppressors when the *Ralushai Commission’s* acknowledgement would make the only legal reprisal a court system with a century of ill repute behind it? For those that suffer under witches, killing them can seem like the only way to get relief. So how can a “rational state” beholden to an international court of public opinion – with its mind made up about witchcraft – suspected witches, their victims, and their killers reconcile the demands of those that are worlds apart? It cannot. It can only “tread carefully.”²²⁵

Witchcraft is murky terrain, and suppressing blindly with a vestige of apartheid repression, or the watered-down “control” policy the *Ralusahi Commission* proposed, will not bring clarity, only more problems. The commission’s point that “most vexing problem

²²³ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 51.

²²⁴ Ashforth “Of Secrecy and Commonplace: Witchcraft in Soweto,” 1218.

²²⁵ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 60.

surrounding witchcraft is that the activities of a witch cannot be witnessed by naked eyes” save cases where “people are caught naked inside someone’s yard” reveals why twentieth-century suppression efforts failed.²²⁶ There was, and is no panacea waiting to be discovered, naked, in the yard. States that envisioned a world without witchcraft beliefs, and, it goes without saying, witches, imagined too, that suppression could be foolproof, but their totalizing measures were almost entirely counterintuitive because they presupposed a uniformity that did not exist.

Witchcraft comes with the territory; its “beliefs” cannot be suppressed. It had and has a range of meanings and modalities. It is an everyday peril that needs a recalibration that can keep pace, without losing perspective. The distance between local and national needs cannot be bridged with sweeping generalizations and a, too colonial for comfort, scolding. To see witchcraft more clearly, the ANC must first step out of the twentieth-century suppression trajectory.

²²⁶ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 57.

Conclusion

Dammed if You Do and Dammed if You Don't: Witchcraft Suppression Post-Apartheid

What lies between the 'colonial' and the 'post' [is] not an event, not a moment, but a process.

– Frederick Cooper

Post-apartheid criminality – no longer black and white – was fraught with nuance. The law was still *the law* and legality the subjective measure of the nation-state's approval, but its infallibility, the sense that nothing and no one was above it faltered up against those that had never been beholden to it: witches. Given that its authority rested on the strength of the law, the state, in all of the twentieth-century configurations, struggled mightily with witchcraft. From the start of the century until its end, witchcraft surfaced in moments of precarity for both the rulers and the ruled. Drowned out by white arrogance for the better part of the century, the “modern” nation-state's gray area – where witches harmed and were harmed in turn – embodied the pitfalls of postcolonial possibility: that their commitment to cultural plurality and their universalist ethos almost always came down to a choice between the two. As inequality widened and unemployment rose after the ANC's victory, the empty promises of prosperity gave rise to “vigilantes” that assumed the moral duties neglected by the state. In the absence of revolutionary relief, witchcraft violence, which was as much an indictment of the powers that be as it was one's circumstances, forced the “rainbow nation” into a rather compromising position.

As witchcraft violence in the Northern Province returned to “normal,” ignorable, levels, efforts to liberate witchcraft and those it affected from colonial-era caricatures were tabled. While the *Ralushai Commission's* legal recommendations have been the subject of academic scrutiny, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was, technically, under the National Parliament's purview, and they “preferred to treat witchcraft as primarily a problem of social

violence” and were “devoted to the issue of regulating traditional healers” rather than taking on witchcraft’s legal ambivalence more directly.²²⁷ Though its proposals were never formally considered or implemented by those authorized to do so, the commission’s requisition at the height of the violence in the Northern Province, the scope of its inquiry, and the volume of case evidence reviewed demonstrate how anxious the ANC was – seduced by the old colonial fantasy – to find the remedy. Ironically, given the commission’s emphasis on “[drawing] a clear line” between the aggressors and aggrieved, its “terminological slippages” exposes the lack of understanding behind its rigorous inquiries.²²⁸ Nowhere is the flattening of witchcraft’s nuance, or the commission’s attempt to make it more “controllable” more glaring than its “quixotic project to create an official association that would discipline the healers and select the ‘legitimate’ ones.”²²⁹ The grafting of administrative imaginings onto much messier realities suggests that commissioners could not regulate the incomprehensible facets of witchcraft, only abstract them.

Their regulatory proposals overlook both the murkiness of the occult and the supernatural expertise and means needed to counter it. Divination works because *dingaka* possess innate capabilities. Trying to eliminate the undesirable (magical) elements of traditional healing by bringing the profession under the state’s control would, much like suppression legislation, cast doubt on the ANC for undermining practices that people trust.²³⁰ The commission’s approach to traditional healing and witchcraft beliefs shows how “culture” more broadly was tolerable so long as it did not threaten the state’s authority, and constitutional recognition was conditional even if not explicitly so. The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa legitimized a

²²⁷ Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, 262.

²²⁸ Geschiere, “Witchcraft and the Limits of the Law,” 228; *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 61.

²²⁹ Geschiere, “Witchcraft and the Limits of the Law,” 237.

²³⁰ *Report of the Ralushai Commission*, 61.

non-threatening version of witchcraft beliefs distinct from the illegality of related violence. A nonrecognition of the lethality of its namesake, this bifurcation, where everyone “wins” so long as no one dies, overlooks how “the violence is the enactment of the belief.”²³¹ In this context, witchcraft violence was just as unjustified as it was in the colonial framework. For the democratic state, the ends did not justify the means because witchcraft was stripped of its devastating materiality. Witches could be real – at least in theory – but not to the extent that they have to die for others to survive. It was a quasi-recognition, a way of seeing, but not truly believing in the power of someone else’s reality.

Where witchcraft was invisible to the naked eye and more devastating for it, witch killings were harder to ignore and easier to prosecute. Unlike their predecessors, that did not believe in relativism or witches, the ANC had an obligation to recognize and protect cultural difference. In trying to balance “legal rationalities against moral relativities [and] the universal rights of citizens against the demands of culture,” witchcraft violence, perhaps the most culturally loaded of crimes, exposed the hidden hierarchy: valid in principle but not when acted upon, individual rights always trumped collective.²³² So “finely tuned to the contradictions, mysteries, and irrationalities of the here and now” witchcraft was at the heart of the “paradox of the Postcolony, the fact that it is a place of both infinite possibility and utter impossibility.”²³³ The state cannot take both sides with witchcraft; someone dies, no matter how they compromise.

For a government claiming to champion all rights, but knowing that all were not created equal, witchcraft was and is political quicksand. Much like the controversy surrounding the 2004 Communal Land Rights Act (CLARA), which granted control over land use and allocation to

²³¹ Comaroffs, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 531.

²³² Comaroffs, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 533.

²³³ Comaroffs, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 535.

traditional authorities and was later declared unconstitutional, witchcraft is entangled with questions of power relations, gender, and racial oppression, and inequality that are so weighed down by histories of invalidation and resentment that the ANC would rather defer them – and their real-world consequences – than be crushed by them. The perpetrators of witchcraft violence that retaliate against witches live on the precipice of belonging in post-apartheid South Africa, representing “the fractal nature of contemporary political personhood, the fact that it is overlaid and undercut by a politics of difference and identity” amounting to an “uneasy, unresolved, ambiguous coexistence with other modes of being in the world.”²³⁴ The ANC’s decision to leave witchcraft in limbo, for fear of making the wrong move, has dangerous implications for all, regardless of whether witches are how they picture their anguish.²³⁵

The problem with witchcraft in post-colonial South Africa is not simply how it meshes with the democratic paradigm, and the assumptions about rational governance embedded therein, but how it is related to widening inequality, disease, and “the rise of a neoliberal capitalist order that appears everywhere to have intensified identity politics.”²³⁶ Witchcraft is tied to and born of frailty. Part of the constellation of forces that make life cruel and unfair, it catches at how devastating it is to be vulnerable, to be human. Not so much a source of suffering, as a name for it, witchcraft embodies all the threats unseen. Just as witchcraft carries an unspeakable type of pain, so too does HIV. Proven to be an equally deadly and undeserved sort of suffering, HIV/AIDS afflicts otherwise healthy individuals and ravages communities where “spiritual insecurity” and inequality already make the quotidian life-threatening.²³⁷ Like witchcraft,

²³⁴ Comaroffs, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 537.

²³⁵ The Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was amended in 1970, where the single category identifying accusers and diviners was divided into two. The language is the same, verbatim, and both categories are subject to the original penalty from 1957 but were just put onto separate lines to distinguish between the two.

²³⁶ Comaroffs, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 522.

²³⁷ Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, 1.

HIV/AIDS is an unabating evil, a chronic liability. As Adam Ashforth notes, in areas where people lack access to sufficient medical services, “the failure to act against witchcraft is potentially serious for the legitimacy of political and juridical institutions,” especially since witchcraft and HIV/AIDS often manifest in the same ways.²³⁸ For the victims of witchcraft, whose “scant trust of officialdom” is rooted in both apartheid memories and disenchanting “new” beginnings, the ANC’s prosecution of *dingaka* and witch hunters is a betrayal.²³⁹ The fact that the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 – institutionalized racism’s living legacy – remains in effect is the post-apartheid state’s failure to redress colonial injustice, protect citizens from witches, represent popular interests, or, relatedly, improve the poor material conditions in which they proliferate. Thus far, the state has failed to consider how witchcraft splits opinion by subject position, and how justice for one, it deems worthy, is its denial for another.²⁴⁰

Taking a different approach than the ANC, the post-colonial Cameroonian government has, since the 1980s, cracked down on witchcraft rather than beliefs.²⁴¹ Ironically, this has only “reaffirmed the popular obsession with witchcraft as an omnipresent danger. Moreover, the sanctions imposed proved to have completely opposite effects,” seeing as a jailed witch always returns with a vengeance.²⁴² That both policies have failed suggests that the “problem” cannot be approached indiscriminately at the national level. Neither witchcraft nor related violence can be examined outside of the conditions that give rise to them. Witchcraft is a compounded anxiety – a heady blend of chronic patriarchal and socioeconomic unease and recurring political insecurity. It is imbued with both interpersonal strife and overriding dilemmas. The state cannot hope to

²³⁸ Ashforth, “An Epidemic of Witchcraft,” 138.

²³⁹ Ashforth, “An Epidemic of Witchcraft,” 136.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft and the State: Cameroon and South Africa: Ambiguities of ‘Reality’ and ‘Superstition’*, *Past & Present*, Vol. 199, no. 3, (2008): 313–335, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtm070>, 222.

²⁴² Ibid.

understand, let alone manage it, without considering the full spectrum of behaviors, developments, and perspectives it holds.

The crisis surrounding witchcraft violence in the Northern Province in the 1990s was, in part, a reaction to the erosion of patriarchal and generational control that undermined social norms. As much as it was revolutionaries taking back power over witches, and evil, it was also men putting women in their place, or graves. The history of witchcraft suppression in the twentieth century was also that of patriarchal oppression. Named “one of the most unsafe places in [the] world to be a woman,” considerable increases in gender-based violence and xenophobic crime in South Africa in recent years have only reaffirmed the need for a more holistic approach to witchcraft violence, and a deeper exploration of the underlying factors of violence against women.²⁴³

The picture of witchcraft beliefs rendered by the nonbeliever will always be incomplete. Its pluralities cannot be tackled head-on. They can only be judged, and truly understood, where they arise. The Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was created by and for those, that lived in a world without nuance or witches. To govern and live with witches is to always be in the dark. The ANC must embrace the uncertainty if they want to truly represent the interests of those who suffer, control, and contest it. To address the needs of the people with the empathy they deserve, the democratic government should consider forgoing a national policy – at the very least discarding apartheid’s – in favor of situational resolutions at the regional level. Though relinquishing control would certainly make for a fraught political undertaking, clinging to tendentious suppression legislation has not, and will not eliminate witchcraft violence. The ANC must reckon with how witchcraft inhabits and exposes the fissures between traditional and

²⁴³ BBC News, “South Africa: Violence Against Women Like A War – Ramaphosa,” *BBC News*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49739977>.

official authorities, and how their witchcraft “problem” is also one of authority in the post-apartheid political landscape. Without fetishizing the preconquest past or overlooking the gendered power dynamics at play, they must take positionality into account. They should include, not just interview, those affected by their decisions in policy discussions. If the ANC is truly committed to eliminating witchcraft violence on their own terms, they should start with what they can control: unemployment, misogyny, and poverty.

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March 27, 2020

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Abstract

Living in Peril: Witchcraft Suppression in the Northern Province, South Africa in the Twentieth Century

By Kate Sandlin

This thesis examines the prerogatives and anxieties that underwrote twentieth century witchcraft suppression legislation in the Northern Province of South Africa. I analyze witchcraft's place in the political imaginaries of colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid states and how witchcraft suppression policies weaponized their biases. More broadly, this thesis explores the subjectivity of evil, suffering, and fear.

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