J. of Modern African Studies, 45, 1 (2007), pp. 171–184.
Printed in the United Kingdom

Reviews

Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa by ADAM ASHFORTH
Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. 385. US$24.95 (pbk.).
doi:10.1017/S0022278X06212424

This is a terrific book, as in terrifying and awe-inspiring. It is part of a world of scholarship only a decade old (in English translation, that is), that has shown how there is a resurgence of witch beliefs in post-colonial times and a recognition, either before or after this resurgence, by African legal systems that European-derived criminal codes do not adequately address those who make malfeasance by supernatural means. Ashforth pushes this literature in a whole new direction: he is not so concerned with why witch beliefs became so prominent in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, but what it means to (wait for it) civil society and democracy.

So why do people in Soweto (or anywhere else in modern Africa) believe in witches? Ashforth answers that question from two vantage points: Evans-Pritchard on Azande witchcraft, and the community in Soweto in which he lived. The studies of witchcraft engendered by Evans-Pritchard's early work argued that witchcraft was a way of analysing misfortune, of assessing causation and allocating responsibility. The best-known example is the collapse of a grainery on men resting beneath it at noon. Everyone understands that graineries collapse because termites eat wood, that's not the issue. Witchcraft explains why termites ate through the wooden legs on that particular day, to harm those particular men. Witchcraft answers the questions that scientific logic cannot: 'Why me? Why now?' For residents of South Africa's townships, whose poverty and victimisation was part of the national and international currency of the struggle against apartheid, the transition to democratic rule left a lot of misfortune to be explained. Promises have not been kept; the everyday violence of domestic abuse and armed robbery of just about everything seems to have increased. Even if it has not, policing the townships has grown more incompetent by the day. The murder rate is horrifying, the number of reported rapes more so, and South Africa boasts the highest rate of road fatalities in the world. The HIV infection rate grows amidst the most cynical of public denials of the epidemic. Unemployment in Soweto is at an all time high: it is estimated that half its adult population do not support themselves. Those seeking to enter the labour market, especially those willing to take even menial jobs, find they must compete with foreigners, mainly Africans who have migrated to South Africa since 1994. Where is the promised transition in Soweto? Witchcraft is perhaps the best possible explanation for early or accidental death and violence against women, and the bewitching of old friends and neighbours is easily explained by a degree of envy that shocks Ashforth's friends even as they come to understand that it is the source of their misery.

This book is not however an account of the perils of modernity. Ashforth never loses sight of the ancestors who exert their will on his friends and neighbours: witch beliefs are both an explanatory system of great accuracy, and the lived disappointments that makes families suspicious, daughters disobedient and fathers angry. Ancestors have taken considerable flack from Christians, and they have retaliated: their disinterest can be as dangerous as their wrath. So can the disinterest of the state. In 1998 the Commission on Gender Equality proposed that witchcraft be recognised in law so the violence done by witches and the violence done by witch finders could be criminalised. Although most state bureaucrats were uncomfortable with discussions about the prevalence of witch beliefs, they were almost eager to bring traditional healers into national health care programmes as a way of combatting the evils of sorcerers. In some ways, the state did thus attempt to serve those who believe in witches and their power to harm them; in other ways, this added a layer of bureaucracy to attempts by Sowetans to understand why they were as afflicted by poverty and disease and bad luck as they were. Traditional healers in the health services do nothing to stop a neighbour or an in-law wanting to harm you.

This harm and the power of democratic South Africa to control it are congealed in the term 'spiritual insecurity', which Ashforth uses to gloss the terms usually used to describe the invisible world of African witches. Spiritual insecurity (which is really very, very embodied) can only be contained, Ashforth's friends and neighbours insisted in their outrage and chagrin, when a neighbour's new job does not cause envy, when a nephew's new car does not rupture a family. This, of course, can only happen when more jobs are available, and when the wages earned through honest or less than honest labour are enough to purchase automobiles. Spiritual security would be having opportunities and being safe to make the most of them.

Ashforth is a political scientist by training, and a long-term resident of Soweto by avocation, and this book is the kind of grounded fieldwork that I, at least, haven't seen that much of lately. Ashforth firmly places himself in Soweto, so while we learn that witchcraft is something that Ashforth's friends and neighbours experience, believe in, write accounts of for him, and generally talk about the way they talk about what they did last night, we also watch Ashforth never quite coming to terms with witches. (Indeed, he ends by saying that not believing in witches gave him a specific materialist position from which to write.) It makes for a very creative tension and a very good book. There's a level of collaboration here because of Ashforth's need to be taught about witchcraft again and again; this gives the book its knife edge of analytic rigour; and it locates witches and witchcraft in the daily lives of Sowetans. And that really is the same lived experience which is the cornerstone of analysis in social sciences and social history, it just happens to involve invisible forces and unseen powers exerted across generations by the living and the dead.

LUISE WHITE
University of Florida