

Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa

In beginning of 2005 Adam Ashforth published *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Ashforth teaches in the Center for Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. In 1990 Ashforth visited South Africa to research the politics of the transition to democracy in relation to his first book, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-century South Africa*. When his friends invited him to stay at Soweto. Soweto is an urban area of Johannesburg city in Gauteng, South Africa. When living in Soweto, he realized that his original plan research the transition to democracy failed to address two issues. First, that the common occurrence of violence, in the absence of “the everyday sense of justice that comes from living in security under a legitimate regime”. And secondly that the omnipresence of witches. He studied there for thirty-six months going back and forth from Soweto to United States from August 1992 to October 1994. He was adopted into a Soweto family and was treated like their own son.

Soweto’s population is around million and a half people. It stretches about twelve miles from the Johannesburg city center to cover an area about thirty miles. “Name coined in 1963 to encompass townships southwest of Johannesburg (21) Million and a half people, living in 30 square miles; majority of population under age 30 (21-22).” Soweto is a typically modern, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, youthful place with only seven percent of people over sixty. Most Sowetans are poor and about sixty percent of households earn less than Rand (ZAR) one thousand five hundred per month, which is approximately one hundred and five dollars.

Most Sowetans do not have a regular or permanent job to support their families. Unemployed Sowetans have to compete with migrants from rural areas and neighboring states. Employers openly hold prejudice against Sowetans young men stating that they are “lazy and unreliable” (30). It is easier for many employers to hire illegal immigrants because they can be paid less than minimal wage. “About half of all adults are financially dependent to some extent, and at least some of the time, on others, when, according to the prevailing norms of adulthood, they should not be” (28). Many of them depend on the pension their parents receive. Also, it is not strange over parents to share their pension with their children or grandkids.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is about “social dimensions of spiritual insecurity in Soweto”(1) at the start of the twenty-century. He explores the town’s daily life and their influence on the residents’ belief in witchcraft. The residents believe that the source of witchcraft is jealousy. The second part deals with the different dimensions and likely causes of Sowetans’ spiritual insecurity, offering a more insightful explanation of witchcraft’s social foundations in the society. The third part, “Spiritual Insecurity and State,” examines the conflicting relationship between witchcraft and the separation of state, and the challenges that spiritual insecurity presents to the democratic government. As stated by Ashforth “No one can understand life in Africa without understanding witchcraft”

(xiii). All three parts relate to the topic of witchcraft involved in the daily life of Soweto people. This essay only focuses on part one of the book.

The Portfolio Committee on Arts, Culture, Science and Technology of the South African parliament reported its public hearings on “a Bill on the protection and promotion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems” (7). During the investigation the committee was warned not to confuse traditional medicine with witchcraft. The healers told the committee that traditional medicine is used for protection purposes while witches intentions are to harm and kill people. Also, all suffering doesn’t come from witches but it is often the cause. How often is not addressed in the public hearings. Diseases like HIV and AIDS are related to witchcraft. Symptoms of AIDS like coughing, abdominal pains, and diarrhea are associated with witchcraft. In Zulu the term *idliso* is used to refer to poison or being poisoned. Witches used muthi, a medium between the witch and the victim. The methods muthi used are similar to the symptoms of AIDS. Not everyone thinks that witchcraft is the cause for HIV, however, misfortune is a concept of witchcraft.

Soweto is a close-knit society and there is plenty of gossip. When talking about someone’s suffering the word witchcraft is never used, but it is implied that a person is suffering because of witchcraft. MaMfete or Ashforth’s mother in Soweto stated that “this thing [witchcraft] comes from a bitterness in somebody’s heart, like a poison, causing jealousy and hatred. And you can never know what’s inside someone’s heart. Truly, you never know” (13). MaMfete is explaining that everyone has barriers/secrets and you can never really tell who is the witch. It can be anyone including your spouse. People gossip because they are tempted to break the barriers of secrecy.

Witchcraft is product and subject of gossip in the Soweto society. Gossip helps people analyze their neighbors and friends to see what is hidden inside their hearts. The advantage of gossip is that it promotes communities to get closer. To be apart of community you have to know who are the witches and talk about them without mentioning their names. “Gossip cements and circumscribes social networks through the sharing of secrets about witches, who are understood to possess secret knowledge” (67). Men tend to use physical violence while women use invisible forces. “Older women are most susceptible to jealousy because of their dependency” (75), but, older women often support more dependents than they should, through their pensions is used by other people and this may result in resentment against them.

When Chief Pakati came to power he declared, “Let government beware in lest protect murders at the expense of innocent people” (15). In other words, shouldn’t the government protect its people from witches the same way it protects them from murderers. Democrats face challenge here because they have to respond to witchcraft as ordinary crime without compromising the democrats ideals of human rights. Also, democrats who deny the existence of witchcraft will be risking being alienated by the citizens. This puts the leaders in a tight spot because if they ignore witches they will be identified as agents of evil forces. The

leaders also have to uphold human rights while not being recognized as witch protectors. It is government's job to be the security for the people. In Soweto, security is *tshiriletso*; meaning to "to conceal from view". They believed that the ancestors provided protraction from the invisible forces not the government.

Soweto is also a very dangerous place. "Each year, according to the police statics, more than a thousand people are murdered in or around Soweto. Approximately 13,000 violent assaults are reported to the police each year and 2,500 or more rapes" (40). These are main reasons for sense of insecurity in Soweto. All this violent acts create hardships, misfortune and suffering that demand clarification. No one in Soweto takes physical protection seriously because the authority is never contacted or can be bribed. In one example Ashforth conveys his friends story, "When a friends mother had a beer bottle broken over her head by a drinking partner with whom she had fallen out, for example she laid a charge at the police station against the other women. She had no husband in the house or grown sons, so he felt she had no choice. The next day her assailant's sons and their friends paid my friend and her family a visit, brandishing guns and demanding the assault charge be dropped. Knowing that evened they did not follow through on their threat to shoot, the boys could easily bribe the police to "lose" the docket, my friend's mother agreed to accept one hundred rand (equivalent to about fifteen dollars at the time) to cover medical expenses" (39). This is as far as the physical protection form the police goes. You can expect justice to hold an assailant and nothing else.

Sowetans believe that there are two primary reasons to harm a person by physical means or by invisible forces. The first is legitimate in Soweto or a way to discipline someone for his or her wrong doings by using witchcraft or being violent toward the person. Another reason is "the desire to compel a person to speak the truth" (50). If violence is used to make a person confess to a crime then is justifiable as a punishment. Otherwise it is not justifiable. Ashforth witness something similar to this in the kangaroo court "one of the community leaders insisted that he could make the man accused of theft confess by beating him with a whip fashioned from a car's fan belt and coat hanger wire" (55). Other members of the court disagreed with him because even if he beat the suspect and he confessed "the crime of beating itself would be taken by the culprit and the community as constituting" payment in full" for the crime" (55). If they beat him than the court member would not have any chance of retrieving the stolen goods.

Ashforth tried to take witchcraft as seriously as the people in Soweto. Ashforth had special bonds with the Soweto people because the Mfete family adopted him. Also and he refers to people that most and anthropologists call "informants" as his "friends." He did not provide a list of interviews and did not record them; meaning that the audience has to take his explanations essentially on trust. He tried to structure the book one theme about the relation of occult and politics in post-apartheid South Africa, but sometimes he gets off topic. He does not expand on how spiritual insecurity poses a real threat for popular trust in the African government. It would be easier to understand daily life and witchcraft if

Ashforth had explained the roles of males and females in the society.

Ashforth admits that he will never fully understand the society that he studies. He does not present any definite conclusion about dynamics of witchcraft, this is not weakness in his work. Because Ashforth apologizes for being a poor mediator of the conflict between his world, the west, and Soweto's: "I have tried to leap this chasm without submitting to belief, without surrendering to the wisdom of those who would teach the truth about life on the other side" (p. 317). His dream of a life in which no one in Soweto has to endure the burden of spiritual insecurity, is satisfactory. Ashforth depicts himself as hanging between two worlds, the West and Africa. He reflects on his mental bond with what he regards as "bleak world devoid of deity" (p. 317) that he resides but also struggles to understand what he regards as his informants' imaginative worldview. From all the ethnographics read this semester, all the anthropologists take various stances in respect to their subject of study, from skepticism to religious conversion. Yet, while many remain in between belief and disbelief, few tend to elaborate their own perspectives as clearly as Ashforth does. His interpretation is valuable as it can help the audience understand the limitations that an anthropologist encounters in a field site such as Soweto.

While the author does not always succeed in combining the issues of daily life in Soweto and democratic government, and the book is sometimes reminiscent of a patchwork quilt of slightly different parts, it is undoubtedly a good addition to the long tradition of academic literature on South African witchcraft. The book also clarifies many issues of post-apartheid society in a thorough and well-informed manner and Ashforth's personal reflections make it an interesting book to read.