

Review

Isak Niehaus (2013) *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa is a minute exploration of one man's descent into a maze of witchcraft-related fear and suspicion. The author, Isak Niehaus, counts amongst the most solid scholars of the African occult to have emerged in the past 20 years. His previous work illuminates in unique ways the entanglement of witchcraft, politics and violence in South Africa. Building on deep knowledge of place and language, the book charts the biography of one of Niehaus' fieldwork assistants, identified by the pseudonym of Jimmy Mohale, and the tragic decline brought by a conjunction of factors – alcoholism, womanising, unemployment, and ultimately AIDS – which in Jimmy's mind become tied around a single explanation: a bewitching curse cast by his father.

The narrative follows the life of Jimmy Mohale with a biographical approach, moving from the history of the Mohale family and Jimmy's childhood in the Bushbuckridge area of north-eastern South Africa, including his first encounters with a witch-familiar (ch 2); to Jimmy's university years under apartheid and his subsequent work as a school-teacher, marked by a deep ambivalence toward the student movement and the African National Congress (ch 3); through a wave of deaths and misfortunes that befall the Mohale family from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, leading to a dramatic decline in Jimmy's life (ch 4 and 5); up until the realisation – or acceptance – that Jimmy's father, Luckson Mohale, was to be held responsible for the misfortunes and downfalls (ch 6). After this turning point, the narrative, which had proceeded at a rather slow pace, makes an abrupt acceleration as the Mohale brothers plot for revenge by consulting diviners who specialise

in retributive magic (ch 7). But all spells fail or backfire and the story ends on a sad note: Jimmy's death of AIDS (ch 8), followed by a thick description of his funeral (ch 9), and a meditative conclusion on the place of witchcraft in post-apartheid South Africa (ch 10).

The book is modest in its theoretical objectives. It builds especially on the achievements of Adam Ashforth (1999, 2005) and Jean and John Comaroff (1993, 1999), who describe the trajectory of witchcraft under capitalist modernity as one of intensification, respectively expressed with the concepts of 'spiritual insecurity' and 'occult economies'. While broadly sharing these premises, Niehaus aims to produce a 'weaker, less deterministic formulation' (5). By recurring to the biographical register and micro-analysis, the case study of Jimmy Mohale aims to demonstrate that 'systemic agency' is less important than intimate and idiosyncratic dynamics pertaining to the sphere of family. The book achieves the goal of un-determination well beyond the author's intentions. As the story unfolds, always in close-up, the reader is faced with a kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria of images and practices: from witch-familiars such as snakes, apes, and donkeys; to zombies and ghosts and mystical antennas; to a panoply of potions and poisons intended to achieve all sorts of effects, from love to death, concocted or countered by a cosmopolitan host of healers and diviners in constant competition. The close-up view allows for little or no pattern to emerge. The phantasmagoria takes a life of its own, independent from the sociologist's or the historian's abstractions, proliferating in 'spaces [that] stand on their own, outside reason, with their own truth that is not subject to any kind of external falsification' (214). Any tranquillising interpretation of witchcraft – be it as explanation of misfortune, collective cultural nightmare, or reaction to capitalism – is put to rest.

Besides this corrosive potential, the book is seminal insofar it anticipates two lines of inquiry that have emerged in its immediate wake. The accent on family and affect finds an immediate echo in the comparative work of Peter Geschiere on the relationship between witchcraft and intimacy (2013). The meticulous discussion of diviners and healers provides an empirical basis to Robert Blunt's argument (2013) on the limits of historical analysis in a context of multiplication of oracles and voices, which generate a massive sense of uncertainty – with the difference that in the case at hand, the multiplication itself is accounted for in historical terms.

As in his previous work, Niehaus has no inclination to romanticism. Perhaps to take a distance from its famous predecessor *Madumo* – a

novelised rendering of a bewitched man's vicissitudes in Soweto – Jimmy Mohale's biography is told in a sober academic prose which makes little concession to literariness. Extensive interview quotes illuminate the text and bring out the personalities of the protagonists, especially Jimmy's. Such rejection of literariness comes however at a price. The tragedy and despair that erupt from the voices of Jimmy and others are handled with a dry sociological language, like coals with a fire tong, producing at times an atmosphere of emotional aloofness. This is especially true of the sections that deal with Jimmy's descent into alcoholism and casual sex, which are described and commented upon with a touch of condescendence. But it is a price worth paying – at least for the reader – for a study that renders with unprecedented rigour the more intimate and elusive aspects of contemporary witchcraft practice.

References

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