

New Magic for New Times¹: Muti Murder in Democratic South Africa

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Ernest Mabuda instructed his wife to turn over a handbag to the village chief. [Chief] Raphalalane looked in. The bag contained the torso of [Mabuda's son] 21-month-old Theophilus Mabuda. The toddler's severed head, arms, legs and genitals were found in Mabuda's hut, neatly packaged separately, in plastic shopping bags (Maykuth, 1998).

Muti murder refers to killing with the purpose of harvesting body parts for use as traditional medicine or 'muti'. Medicine murder is seen in several countries across Africa with ethnographic evidence going back to the early nineteenth century documenting the existence of the practice in southern Africa. But some commentators suggest that South Africa is currently witnessing what is described as an 'epidemic' of occult-related violent crime. It is believed that more than 300 people have been murdered for their body parts in the last decade in South Africa although some accounts put the figure far higher with one investigation reporting that there were 250 muti killings in the country's Limpopo Province alone in a single year. The actual frequency of muti murder is difficult to gauge because in a country with an exceptionally high murder rate – currently estimated at about 43 murders per 100 000 people, one of the highest in the world – it is likely that not every muti-related murder is recognised and recorded as such. While predominantly a phenomenon of the country's more rural provinces, police records indicate that several muti-related killings take place each year also for instance in urban Soweto (Nicodemus, 1999). In 2000 a commission of inquiry into witchcraft, violence and ritual murders was set up by the government after a spate of deaths in Soweto in which young boys aged between one and six had been kidnapped and murdered. 'According to post mortem examination results, the boys were left to bleed to death after having their genitals and thumbs cut off and their eyes gouged out'

(Flanagan, 2002).

An estimated 80 per cent of South Africans regularly use traditional herbs and medicines or *muti* (derived from *umu thi* meaning tree). Of course not all *sangomas* (traditional healers) make use of human body parts as one of the ingredients in their medicines but those that do will place an 'order' with a person hired for this specialist purpose. *Sangomas* seldom do the killing themselves. The order will include not only specifications as to which particular body part or parts are required – testicles for virility purposes, fat from the breasts or abdomen for luck, tongues to smooth the path to a lover's heart – but the very specific manner in which they are to be collected. The use of human body parts for medicinal purposes is based in the belief that it is possible to appropriate the life force of one person through its literal consumption by another. For this reason a victim is often carefully chosen – not just any person's penis as a cure for male infertility, for instance, but that of a man with several healthy children. Strangers or enemies are seldom the target of muti murders (Scholtz et al., 1997). On the contrary, victims are often blood relatives of those involved in their murder; it is not unusual for the victim to be the child of one member of a group involved in planning the murder. In a 2001 case in which a 20-year old mother, Nombovumo Mvinjana, had her facial skin removed with a scalpel and her genitalia, breasts, hands and feet cut off, probably while still alive, among the eight accused were her husband and her uncle (East Cape News, 2001).

It is believed that certain murder gangs specialise in muti killings. Unlike human sacrifice where death is the express purpose of the act, in muti-related killings, death is an anticipated and accepted by-product of the garnering of human organs but it is not the main aim. Indeed it is often preferred that the victim remain alive during the process. When body parts, including internal organs, are removed while the victim is still alive it is believed that the power of the resultant medicine will be greatly enhanced. Harvested

¹ The title echoes a phrase from a 1998 article on occult economies by Jean and John Comaroff in which they refer to 'new magic for new situations' (1998:284).

body parts are usually mixed with other medicinal plant matter and cooked. The product is sometimes consumed, but may also be carried about the person who aims to benefit from its powers or secretly smeared onto the body, clothing or included in the food of the person who is its target, such as a reluctant or abusive lover. The use of human body matter in the production of traditional medicine does not always involve killing. For instance a living person's nail clippings or hair cuttings may secretly be collected by say, a jealous lover or a neighbour or family member bearing a grudge, and used in potions targeted at that person. Or already dead bodies may be exhumed and used for muti purposes. Parts are also sometimes harvested from corpses with mortuary workers and hospital staffers implicated in aspects of the trade. In a 1998 case a Limpopo Province tuberculosis patient disappeared from his hospital bed and was later found dead near the doctors' quarters. His scrotum had been removed and his penis skinned. Police suspected that the killers came from within the hospital given a tight security regime preventing casual access to the premises (wa Afrika, 1998).

Motives vary but economic prosperity, sexual potency and success in matters romantic are by far the most commonly recurrent themes. Genitals, breasts and placentas are said to ward off infertility and bring good luck. The genitalia of young boys and virgin girls are especially highly prized on account of being 'uncontaminated' by sexual contact – and therefore having more potent medicinal properties (Flanagan, 2002). Most traditional medicines are made from herbs and plants but the link with the human body, particularly in matters related to sexuality, has always been strong. *Kigelia africana*'s common name is the sausage tree. Its fruit can grow up to a metre long and resembles a large human penis. The flower is deep red in colour and vaginal in shape. The tree is widely used by traditional healers to help young men become more virile, to help women enhance their breast size and to treat syphilis. If a plant resembling human parts can be considered this efficacious, so much more so the body parts themselves. Mashudu Mundzelele of Limpopo Province managed to escape from five people who sprayed him with pepper spray, dragged him into the bushes and discussed which parts of his body to remove. 'The old woman started throwing bones on the floor

and speaking in a strange language. She then instructed the men to start cutting off my right hand. As one of the men was busy cutting my hand, the other one said "lets cut off his tongue at once". He took out pliers, put them in my mouth and attempted to pluck it out' (Seale, 2006). Nyelisani Sidimela was found with her lips sliced off. She survived but her boyfriend, with whom she was abducted, was found dead. His genitals had been removed. The body of Shonisani Thinandavha was found with the palm of her right hand, upper lip, left ear and both nipples removed.

While sex and sexuality are a recurrent theme in what the Jean and John Comaroffs (1998) have termed the 'archaeology of the fantastic', business and financial concerns feature equally strongly in. In one well-reported case a butcher obtained a severed 'lucky' human hand with which he would slap the meat in his butchery each day 'as a way of invoking the spirits to beckon customers' (Matshikiza, 2004). It is said to be common for human skulls to be buried in the foundations of new buildings to ensure that business conducted there thrives, for body parts to be buried on farms to ensure good harvests and for severed hands to be built into shop entrances to beckon to prospective clients (Flanagan, 2006). A human head is sometimes prescribed for a failing business: 'If the business is not doing well, get a boy's or a girl's head – someone who has a future – and your business will have a future too' (Dr Gordon Chavinduka, president of the Zimbabwean Traditional Healers Association cited in Nicodemus, 1999). Headless bodies emerge from time to time – in shallow graves, hidden in bushes, floating in rivers.

Jean and John Comaroff (1998) define occult economies as 'the deployment, real or imagined of magical means for material ends'. They detail what we know, from historical and anthropological accounts, about the occult in Africa: it is not a form of primitive magic or "animism"; it embodies a set of 'normative convictions about moral order, social value and material equity'; it provides a 'matter-of-fact repertoire of "first cause" explanations in the face of human misfortune or natural catastrophe'; it suggests a set of practical techniques that can be deployed by those with the necessary power and knowledge to do so (Jean and John Comaroff, 2004). Muti murder is but one component of this interrelated belief system which underpins other magical

phenomena also such as the appearance of 'zombies' and mythical dinosaur-like creatures, pyramid schemes and financial scams involving for instance the claimed ability to magically transform suitcases of paper into cash.

The South African Police Service, in an article posted on its website links ritual murder to the centuries-old belief that human blood and body parts are essential to the preparation of muti. But whether or not the use of human body parts is traditionally sanctioned is a matter of dispute. Nonkonyana Mwelo, Chairperson of the Eastern Cape branch of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa), for instance, claims he 'does not believe' human organs are being used by 'witch doctors for muti', does not see any use for body parts as muti and cannot understand why bodies are being mutilated in this way, other than as a result of ordinary criminality (Cape Argus, 2006). In contrast, South African Council of Churches' provincial chairperson, Reverend Thivhilaheli Nedohe argues:

This kind of murder only shocks people who want to be shocked. If we have to go back into history, we will see that these deeds have been happening, and will persist, as long as the perpetrators continue to believe in it as a religion. South Africa is a secular state which means all religions are recognised and one cannot believe in a certain religion without following all the rituals required. In the past there was a time each year in which word would come out from the traditional authorities that *mngwa dzo vulelwa* (the dogs have been let loose), which means it was the season for ritual murders. Basically it was a warning that people should be vigilant and anyone found can be a victim. It was accepted as such and no one was going to apportion blame to anyone or take action. As long as some people are unwilling to stand up and admit that it has always been their religious belief, the murders will continue. And once they admit it, it will be the start of a process of eradicating the murders and begin the process of healing (City Press, 2006).

As post-apartheid South Africa seeks to forge for itself an identity as a modern, industrialising nation with a constitution embodying the most progressive and enlightened principles of liberal democracy, muti killings are often presented as a wayward throwback to a dark and savage past. Andrew Maykuth's (1998) article on Ernest

Mabuda's murder of his own son, apparently for muti purposes, for instance, is headed 'In the new South Africa, a chilling link with the past'. But as Maykuth's own observations inadvertently suggest, muti killings are more accurately – albeit more complicatedly and somewhat less conveniently – interpreted as a phenomenon of South Africa's present. Interviewed by journalists and the police, Mabuda's family explained that he made his living collecting medicinal plants for sale to traditional healers but that more recently he had begun passing himself off, in true self-made entrepreneurial spirit, as a healer in his own right. Just a month before the murder a local weekly newspaper had reported Mabuda's claims that he was capable of curing AIDS with traditional medicine (Maykuth, 1998). The day after the death of Mabuda's son, residents recall two men arriving in a white pickup and departing carrying a parcel. The body parts recovered by police from Mabuda's hut were carefully prepared and packaged in plastic, apparently reading for shipment. Mabuda's was a business enterprise. Prized body parts can command up to R10 000 – reportedly the current going rate for a human heart. Killers themselves, though, often find themselves at the bottom of the muti trade's profit hierarchy. In May 2006, Sipho Dube told the Johannesburg High Court that he was paid R50 for strangling a 5-year old boy and cutting off his ears, R100 for killing another boy and R150 for killing a boy whose blood he drew (The Star, 2006). By styling himself as a traditional healer and supplying his own ingredients, Mabuda was effectively making a very common profit-oriented choice: cutting out the middle man.

Allied to the conception of muti murder as a throwback to the past is the presentation of the phenomenon as part of an 'African' belief system which holds that the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, social relationships are not contingent but necessary and the person is consequently constituted by the social relationships in which they necessarily find themselves. Individuals are not regarded as self-sufficient but as the products of the community. Therefore, 'insofar as the cultural community constitutes the context or medium in which the individual person works out and chooses his/her goals and life plans, and, through these activities, ultimately becomes what he/she wants to be – the sort of status he/she wants to acquire – the cultural community

must be held as prior to the individual' (Gyekye, 2002). Within this context, some argue that muti murder is to be understood as propelled by the logic of sacrifice of a single human being for the greater good of the community. What is particularly 'African' about this idea remains to be established – it is a logic which is universally compelling and is, after all, also the central driving narrative of Christianity. Still, historical and older anthropological accounts present muti murders as arising in the context of a community seeking help from a traditional healer for some misfortune that has befallen it communally. So persuasive is this motive of the greater good held to be, that in her work on ritual murder in Swaziland, H. Ngubane has argued that ritual murder should not be termed 'murder' given that it involves sacrifice of one member of a community for the greater good of that community. She therefore equates muti murder – which was apparently rare in the colonial era – with euthanasia or abortion (Ngubane, 1986 cited in Scholts, 1997).

But the goal of communal good sought at the expense of a single member of a community does not describe the majority of contemporary muti murders which are clearly initiated by individuals for their personal benefit. Many murders are ordered and paid for by individual businessmen, syndicates or political hopefuls seeking their own, individual success. As anthropologist Charlanne Burke (2000) points out, such people are 'generally already prosperous and powerful, and are often formally educated. They straddle both realms of knowledge – educated enough to be economically successful and able to command or pay for labour, including killing, and knowledgeable enough in the sphere of witchcraft to deal in muti'. And rather than singling out individuals to sacrifice for the greater communal good, it is simply the weak, the expendable, who are preyed upon. As one of Burke's young informants put it in her study of ritual murder in Botswana, '[t]hey picked this girl, who was a clever girl and a good student, because she was poor and they thought no one would make a fuss if she disappeared' (ibid.). Arcane justifications for the choice of young victims (they are unsullied by sexual contact, they possess the qualities of physical vitality and energy which the requisitioning agent seeks) notwithstanding, it is also true that children make the most vulnerable of victims, the simplest to lure, the easiest to overpower, the least likely to cause a fuss.

Rather than an aberration in South Africa's dominant narrative of progress then, muti murders are to be understood as a feature of the present period, a period which the Comaroffs have called 'Millennial Capitalism' (2002) by which they mean, not just capitalism at the millenium, but capitalism invested with salvic force; with intense faith in its capacity, if rightly harnessed, wholly to transform the universe of the marginalised and disempowered. At its most extreme, this faith is epitomized by forms of money magic, ranging from pyramid schemes to prosperity gospels that pledge to deliver immense, immediate wealth by largely inscrutable means' (Jean and John Comaroff, 2002).

The liberation struggle's anticapitalist overtones guided by the motif of the 'unity of the oppressed' have been replaced by contemporary South Africa's narrative of black economic empowerment which suggests the availability of new possibilities for wealth generation and personal enrichment. The ideology of consumerism underpins a period in which consumption is the marker of success and wellbeing. However, by definition, only a very few can succeed by this measure. The state has embraced an export-led model of growth with its attendant regime of wage restraint and labour market flexibility aimed at creating a foreign-investment friendly environment. While some have been, very visibly, economically 'empowered', as is the reality of neoliberalism everywhere, these opportunities will inevitably benefit the very few. The Sunday Times Rich List of 2006 indicates that five members of the ANC's Executive Committee have a combined wealth of R1.5 billion in shareholdings alone. About 250 black empowerment deals were concluded in 2004 but 72 per cent of the estimated R62 billion generated by these deals went to four men, Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale, Patrice Motsepe and Saki Macozoma.

Limits on social spending and the failure to come close to meeting job creation targets mean that fabulous wealth co-occurs with abject poverty and this circumstance creates the space within which desperate measures will be taken to secure a toehold in that small stratum of the privileged. While liberal humanism espouses an ideology of human rights and the unique and valuable nature of each citizen the reality of life under these circumstances suggests otherwise. Lives appear as infinitely disposable, especially the lives of the poor. People live in squalor amidst

unchecked disease; where work is available it is for meagre wages. Capitalism suggests the infinite expendability of the poor. One unskilled worker is easily replaced by another and the system thrives precisely on this interchangeable and expendable nature of labour which keeps wages low and profits high. For the newly 'economically empowered' black entrant into this force field of individual success defined by profit margins, competition is stiff – again, that is the whole point of capitalism. And in the competition for scarce resources the most enterprising among the new relatively advantaged resort to whichever strategy which will give them the edge in their ventures.

While it would be tempting then, to set up a two-tiered analysis in which muti murders are read as the uncivilised relic of past ways of life yet to be made civil through ever greater incorporation into the institutions and way of seeing and being of constitutional democracy, this easy binary masks the significant sense in which the conditions of the present actually give rise the phenomenon of muti murders. Occult economies draw on cultural cadences with long histories but they also need to be understood as taking a very specific form in late capitalism – a condition that the Comaroffs (1998) have described as consisting of an odd fusion of 'the modern and the postmodern, of hope and hopelessness, of utility and futility, of promise and its perversions'. It is these very conditions for instance, which place the very poor in contact with fabulous but unattainable riches, with the fantastical good fortune of others gained by apparently mysterious means, the fantasy of 'abundance without effort' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002). As Geschiere (1997) points out, the local and global come together in witchcraft as a means of grappling with a world in which riches are available to so few and desired by so many. It is these very conditions which cause people to be measured by their wealth, status, material possessions and sexual conquests – but which place these indicators of achievement by definition in the hands of the few and out of reach of the many. After all the metaphor that has long been used to understand the mechanism of the market is that of the 'hidden hand' – in other words, it works in a way that seems mysterious and out of reach of ordinary explanation. The idea of anyone being capable of gaining great wealth and the seemingly

fantastical way of life that goes with it, rapidly and with apparent ease, is part of capitalism's own justificatory narrative.

As a result of a common muti murder profile in which the perpetrators are elderly, the victims youthful, some analysts have suggested that muti murders be interpreted chiefly as generational crimes. Jean and John Comaroff (1998), for instance, argue that in postcolonial South Africa's dramatic rise in occult economies the major lines of opposition have been neither race nor class but generation mediated by gender. However, the record does not always support this interpretation. In Mvinjana's case her assailants were mainly in their twenties although the group of eight accused did include one 60-year old man and one 50-year old man. Similarly, Ernest Mabuda was just 27 when her murdered son for muti. On the other hand unequal gender relations and wide-scale violence against women clearly form part of the context in which muti murders are perpetrated. More often than not, it is men who profit from the commerce in body parts and women and children are frequently the victims. Where women collude with perpetrators their participation is often (although of course not always) coerced. In the murder of Theophilus Mabuda, Ernest Mabuda is said to have lured his wife into the forest under the pretext of collecting wood and then demanded that she kill their son. She was beaten when she refused and forced to hold him while his father cut the child's throat (Maykuth, 1998).

Rather than purely generational, muti murder can usefully be interpreted through the lens of a politics of knowledge generated by shifts in modes of work, productive labour and value. While the present generation of youth have access to better formal educational opportunities than their parents would have had under apartheid, the latter have access to what are presented as other forms of knowledge. For young people, as Burke (2000) traces in her study of magical thinking among youth in Botswana, achievement in formal education is key to gaining a foothold in the contemporary mode of production, driven as it is by the manipulation of knowledge and the requirement of sophisticated levels of functional literacy. But while they may outstrip their parents' levels of formal education, the latter can claim the sole right to a body of knowledge from which youth are, according to tradition, excluded: 'control and

possession of a different kind of knowledge, the kind usually termed “traditional”, is critical in doing witchcraft ... and anyone who knows how to wield this knowledge can profoundly impact ever the most bookish sophisticate’. Again, the register is at once accommodationist and oppositional – borrowing one of the key motivating slogans of prevailing knowledge economies, ‘knowledge is power’, the unschooled adult claims the power of abstruse forms of knowledge which are, by their nature, difficult to refute. On this terrain at least, ‘information is managed by adults’ (Burke, 2000) and youth know nothing.

Muti murders raise two critical points of tension in South Africa’s nation-building project which has cast itself in the mould of the modern nation state governed by rational/legal constitutionalism. The first concerns the question of legal universalism versus cultural relativism. Some commentators (see for example Ngubane, 1986) have presented attempts to criminalise ‘occult-related’ crimes as a form of cultural imperialism given a context in which the vast majority of citizens regularly consult traditional healers and are convinced of the efficacy of the magical arts. In the literature on liberalism and multiculturalism, the debate is framed mainly in terms of what to do about minority ‘cultures’ and practices which challenge dominant norms of individual rights and constitutional legalism in modern democratic states. The difference here is that South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994 instated a formal political regime of secular, rational liberal individualism while the majority of citizens hold views – about communal rights, values, the nature of the self, the reality of the magical – which are challenging to that official state narrative. Importantly this majority includes also many within the governing elite. Does a commitment to equal respect before the law entail taking seriously, taking at face value, even, the pervasive belief on the part of citizens as well as state functionaries in the real existence and practical outcomes of witchcraft? To bring to bear liberal sensibilities governed by rational humanism on this question is to create an explosive cognitive dissonance. It simply cannot be contained and managed in any viable way.

On the other hand, there are those (see for instance, Benhabib, 2002) who suggest that the reification of culture and the presentation of these conflicts in terms of inimical systems of belief masks their more prosaic material basis. If the

latter view is taken then these are matters of ordinary criminality spurred by the very ordinary political problem of scarce resources and the ways in which various positionings within social hierarchies of power – age, gender, class – are used to try to gain access to the means of material wellbeing. The ruling ANC, for its part, is understandably wary of a politics of difference based on assertions of primordial affiliation which threatens to disperse the congregants of what has always been a very broad church party. At present the ruling party commands a two-thirds majority in Parliament despite an electoral system (party list proportional representation) which favours minority representation. In other words, in a multi-ethnic country it has pulled off an extraordinary feat of unifying a constituency characterised by huge diversity – of creed, colour, language, class, ethnic origin and cultural persuasion. There is an argument that ‘tough love’ economic policies and the resultant low inflation and relative economic stability that post-apartheid South Africa has seen would not have been possible had this unifying feat failed. So for the ANC, there is much at stake in quelling the political assertion of cultural identity. At the same time though, the ruling party understands acutely the delicate balancing act which it must accomplish between being seen to be insensitive to beliefs and customs which are widespread among its constituents, party faithful and leading figures alike, and managing politically the divisive potential of assertions of difference.

The typical response of a state founded upon liberal tenets is to try to enact laws to cope with the problem of managing diversity. The constitutional protection of cultural rights, the regulation of traditional male circumcision, the outlawing of virginity testing on children – are some examples of how South Africa’s democratic state has sought to manage ‘tradition’ by way of the legal system. But laws are of no consequence unless backed up by force and this raises the second point of tension which concerns the question of the democratic state’s sole right legitimately to wield the means of force. The monopolisation of the means of violence is part of the very definition of the liberal state. Its founding narrative justifies citizens’ loss, under the rule of law, of the freedom to use force to pursue their own ends, by way of the contention that this will make citizens safer than they otherwise would be. In contemporary South

Africa it is a contention that requires, on the part of citizens, a certain suspension of disbelief. It is simply not the case that the state has shown itself capable of protecting the health, life and liberty of its citizens. The point is not simply that the rate of crime is unacceptably high but that the rate of prosecution is unacceptably low. As a result, wealthier citizens seldom bother to make use of the formal criminal justice system. Their homes are secured by private alarm systems, guard dogs and privately owned weapons, their neighbourhoods are policed by private security agencies; their cars are armed with privately monitored tracking devices; and when these fail, they may report a crime but not in the hope that it will be 'solved'. Their only motivation is to obtain a case number which will enable them to claim the value of their goods from their private insurance agencies. In all of these ways, it might be suggested, the middle classes in South Africa, as has happened in many other polities, have opted out of their social contract with the state.

The poor have recourse to none of these options and have, as a result employed different methods. The post-1994 period has seen a rise in vigilantism – for this is what it is termed when the poor police themselves. Communities sickened by the presence of rapists, murders and thieves in their midst and convinced that there is little point in leaving justice to the formal state police services, frequently 'take the law into their own hands'. The phrase is richly evocative. It suggests the unravelling of a core component of the state's founding narrative. And the sense of the state and its machinery being irrelevant to people's concerns is rendered all the more stark in the case of those who find themselves beset by crimes which they understand to be ontologically at odds with the norms that govern the formal legal order of the state. Is it viable to report to the local police station that your neighbour has bewitched your teenage daughter causing her to fail at school and keep bad company? Is there any 'real' crime to investigate and what would count as a 'proper' investigation on the part of police? What form of evidence would one present that would be acceptable for purposes of prosecution? Would the evidence stand up to cross-examination in a court of law? And how to deal with the difficulty of the very public nature of the reporting and investigation procedure when one is dealing with a perceived enemy versed in feared magical ways which could

very easily be redirected? Again, the inherent ontological incommensurability is too acute to be easily managed.

On the face of it, muti murder might appear to be an easier case than other instances of reported witchcraft for the formal police system to deal with. Someone has been killed and their parts cut up for sale – on virtually any system of law, a crime has been committed. The difficulty remains however, seething just below the surface. For one thing, it is often the case that the crime which members of a community report or note, is different from the one police investigate. The latter are investigating murder, albeit murder with a rather sensational motive. Whereas for many members of communities in which such crimes occur, what needs to be investigated is particular, malevolent occult practices. Muti murder is part of a continuum of magic and in this paradigm it can make no sense to investigate muti murder but not other aspects of the dark arts including bewitching. That only accentuates the lack of faith that citizens have in the legal system's ability to cope with such crimes, as do instances in which the legal system turns known practitioners free for 'lack of evidence'. Citizens would typically wish to make a distinction between occult practices that are approved of because they are performed in order to secure a communally sanctioned goal and those that have antisocial, selfish aims – the occult is, as the Comaroffs (2004) put it, 'intrinsically ambiguous'. This ambiguity means that some practices considered 'crimes' by the formal legal system are approved of by citizens because they are performed for good, communally beneficial ends. In other words, it is not so much killing and the use of body parts for medicinal purposes that is regarded as the inherent problem – it is accepted that body parts make potent medicines, and under extreme circumstances such medicines might be called for – but rather the ends to which those practices are put. This is a distinction which a system of universal law has no way of accommodating. Here different forms of 'knowing' are at work and they sit uncomfortably with one another. To be able to tell the difference requires a particular form of 'knowing' that will seldom be seen as available to the average police officer who 'knows the law' but is insensible to these subtle distinctions.

Here we see exemplified the legal trappings of liberal democracy juxtaposed with a social imaginary which is deeply at odds with the

rationalistic, Enlightenment-based assumptions of that belief system. The dissonance in the juxtaposition is revealed in the failure, in South Africa, to prosecute the traditional healers who order body parts from killers hired for that purpose. Community members are too afraid to testify against traditional healers so if prosecution does occur it is only of the actual perpetrators of the killings. For their part, the latter are often reluctant to inform on the healer for fear of being cursed. Clearly the faith that citizens have in the legal bureaucracy is far outweighed by their belief in the power of the occult. When perpetrators are asked to cite their motives, the logic again, defies the attempts by liberal rationalism's available frameworks to contain it. 'All we know is that he killed the child under the instructions of his ancestral spirits', said Mutuwa Nengovhela, acting attorney general of Thohoyandou, of Ernest Mabuda's murder of his own infant son for muti. The attorney general here struggles to remain within the logic of evidence-motive-crime while the accused refuses to remain within that logic. But is the latter refusal itself carefully calculated rather than being evidence of inherently incommensurable world views at play? Claims to the immutability of 'tradition' often act simply to justify what are in reality largely commercially-inspired crimes, the body parts packaged and traded for profit like any other commodity in the capitalist marketplace. In Mabuda's case, his claim to the legitimising mantle of 'culture' was fiercely rejected by a largely Christian community who were enraged at the killing of his son and turned him in to the authorities. Village chief Moshade Raphaelalane commented that Mabuda would likely be 'lynched' if he were to return (cited in Maykuth, 1998). This was indeed the fate of the accomplice of a sangoma in Langa, Cape Town squatter camp in 1994. The remains of a five-year old boy were found in the sangoma's shack, the boy's arms having been amputated along with the genitals and other body parts. The sangoma was arrested and hospitalised after being found mentally unfit to stand trial. The accomplice was tried but acquitted. Upon his return to the community he was necklaced (a rubber tyre placed around his neck and set alight) (Scholtz et al., 1997) – a method of killing which was widely employed against perceived collaborators with the apartheid state.

CONCLUSION

The increased incidence of medicine murder in times of political and economic stress has been well documented in the historical literature. A number of vital ingredients mingle together in contemporary South Africa to provide the backdrop against which the apparent increase in the incidence of muti murder has arisen. In the first instance, the society is a transitional one. Transitions confront citizens with all sorts of challenges. One key challenge is contending with hope thwarted. The ANC came to power with the election-winning slogan 'a better life for all' but for the great majority of citizens concrete manifestation of that promise in their daily lives remains elusive. A second key challenge of transitional societies is the forging of identities in changed circumstances. The ANC-as-liberation-movement unified the black majority under the anti-apartheid banner. There could be no question that all, regardless of age, gender, creed, sexual orientation, ethnicity or class, stood to benefit from apartheid's demise. Now that the crucial anti-apartheid unifying banner is no longer relevant, there is a kind of scramble for identity taking place. South Africa's youth has been particularly hard hit by the transitional phase in which identities are especially fluid as the certainties of struggle-defined positionings give way to new identity-formation. Some have been able to find a place at the dinner table of liberated South Africa and to claim for themselves a slice of the dominant identity of enterprise and hard core individuality that drives the ideology of capitalism. But for those who remain excluded from this still highly exclusive guest list, other forms of identification offer themselves in a manner which is at once accommodating of, and oppositional to, the dominant narrative of entrepreneurship and individualism. While the ruling party brands itself as ethnically nondescript, the resort to markers of culture and tradition as new markers of identity is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary South Africa. In this context, as Jean and John Comaroff (1998) have pointed out, the practice of mystical arts does not imply 'an iteration of, a retreat into, "tradition"'. On the contrary, they suggest, such practices can often be seen as ways of crafting 'new forms of consciousness' and of expressing disaffection with the inequities and burdens of modernity. They refer to this 'retooling' of

culturally familiar technologies for new ends as 'new magic for new situations'. It is new magic because while, in superficial ways, it draws on tropes from an earlier time, in its causation, form and manifestation, it is thoroughly contemporary.

Secondly, muti murders take place, in South Africa, against a backdrop not simply of extreme poverty – that would be one thing – but of extreme economic inequality. With one of the least favourable Gini coefficient scores in the world, the legacy of apartheid in South Africa is a country which is home at once to some of the most privileged human lifestyles on the planet and some of the world's most deprived. The post-apartheid moment has facilitated the emergence of, albeit small, new black elites whose new-found wealth is consumed conspicuously: the houses, clothes, cars and cell phones seem to appear suddenly, almost magically and 'given that they have appeared with indecent speed and with little visible exertion, their material provenance remains mysterious' (Comaroff Jean and John, 2002).

A third key element of the context in which muti murder is taking place in South Africa today is of a society beset by exceptional levels of criminality and of violence and murder in particular. This factor is of course not unrelated to the preceding. Much of the crime that takes place in South Africa is economically motivated. Perhaps its most particular feature is the low value which human life is able to command in the criminal market. Whole families are gunned down in exchange for a motor vehicle, a schoolgirl's head is bashed in for possession of her cell phone, a young boy is strangled for his ears, worth R50 on the medicine market. In other words, the latter instance is not to be understood as exemplifying anything particularly brutal about muti killers or their commissioning agents, but is to be understood as an element in a more generalised landscape characterised by the profound cheapening of human life and the apparent dehumanisation of the perpetrators of violent crime. There is nothing that special about muti killers in this regard.

A fourth element of the context and again related to the former is the fact of South Africa's exceptionally shameful record of gender-based violence and violence against young children. In 1994 there were 18, 801 reported cases of rape in South Africa. By 2001 that figure had risen to 24, 892 (Meier, 2002). There were 360 000 crimes

committed against women and children in South Africa in 2004. From January to September 2001, 15 650 rapes of children were reported to the South African Police Services (SAPS). Of these 5 859 children were between 0-11 years and 9 791 were between 11-17 years (Van Niekerk, 2003). According to the South African National Council for Child Welfare, since 1994 child rape in South Africa has increased by 74 per cent (Posel, 2003). In a country where the abuse, injury and killing of wives, female partners and children is endemic, lives and limbs sell cheaply, and none more cheaply than those of women and the very young. When the torso of the young boy British police called "Adam" was found in the River Thames on September 21, 2001, in an apparently muti-related killing, there followed one of the most high profile criminal investigations in British history. In South Africa it is doubtful that the occurrence would make the evening news or the front page of the dailies.

A final contextual element is provided by the particular social contours that the AIDS epidemic has taken in South Africa. It is estimated that 6.2 million South Africans are living with HIV/Aids (*Mail and Guardian*, 2005). The disease has created new patterns and rates of death (Posel, 2002): the majority of those afflicted are in the under-45 age group, afflicting precisely those who should have been the heirs to liberation. Secrecy and stigmatization continues to surround the way in which HIV is dealt with in South Africa – a circumstance which is not helped by the President's public denial of the severity of the epidemic and his repeated public expressions of doubt that the virus exists and is the cause of AIDS. The effects of this denialism Deborah Posel (2004) argues, have 'generated more division, conflict, uncertainty and anguish within the polity than any other issue since the inauguration of the post-apartheid state.' The President's approach to HIV/AIDS is echoed by that of his health minister who has courted the company of AIDS denialists such as Mathias Rath who punts vitamins as a cure for AIDS (*Mail and Guardian* 2005). Rath has apparently been influential in the minister's own very public advocacy of traditional medicine and diet prescriptions including garlic, beetroot and lemon rind as alternatives to Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs).

In the context of President Mbeki's denial that the disease exists, public questioning of

statistical evidence concerning the changes in country's death patterns, dismissal of evidence that HIV is largely heterosexually transmitted in South Africa, and likening of the use of ARVs to biological weapons used in the apartheid era (Lodge, 2002), it is unsurprising that the majority of citizens experience the mounting death toll in their communities as mysterious. Mortuaries are reportedly overflowing with bodies piled on top of one another. Flood waters wash bodies from shallow graves as families too poor to bury their dead at the rate at which they are dying, resort to illegal burials. Households are headed by young children, the adults long dead. And there is no clear state narrative or accompanying practical programme indicating why this might be happening or what can be done about it. Instead, the President, justifiably prickly about a narrative of scientific progress and enlightenment versus African backwardness, inadvertently oils the market in alternative medicines which is understandably seeing its clients calling for strong medicine.

Far from being a bizarre throwback to old ways then, something that South Africa will 'grow out of' as its democracy matures, South Africa's muti murder epidemic can be interpreted as very much of and for this time. It can best be understood in the context of attempts to create order in desperately disorderly times. It is by no means a random or spontaneous practice but is rather, always carefully planned for very specific rational purposes. Moreover, these purposes are always thoroughly modern. Spoken in local registers the themes are the global ones of changing capitalist relations, unemployment, changing patterns of disease and death. Sangomas are business people: they buy and sell commodities and their trade is much facilitated by the use of the postal services, motor vehicles and cell phones. Their instrument of choice is the scalpel rather than the spear. Among their most prized clientèle are themselves business people seeking advantage over competitors, success in new ventures or a widening of their customer base. Muti murders in common with many other features of South Africa's occult economy can thus be understood as an attempt to re-create a sense of orderliness and predictability in an unruly post-apartheid, late capitalist world of rapidly changing markers of identity, failed political expectations, massive economic deprivation amidst the sudden and conspicuous enrichment of the few, rampant

criminality and the seemingly inexplicable rise in the death rate of once healthy adults.

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KEYWORDS Medicine murder; occult; witchcraft; magic; millennial capitalism

ABSTRACT 'Muti murder' refers to killing with the purpose of harvesting body parts for use as traditional medicine or 'muti'. Some commentators suggest that South Africa is currently witnessing an 'epidemic' of occult-related violent crime. While it is tempting to read muti murders as the uncivilised relic of past ways of life yet to be made civil through ever greater incorporation into the institutions of constitutional democracy, the paper argues that this easy binary masks the significant sense in which the conditions of the present actually give rise the phenomenon of muti murders. Occult economies draw on cultural cadences with long histories but they also need to be understood as taking a very specific form in late capitalism. Historically shown to increase during times of social stress, muti murder in contemporary South Africa can be understood as arising in a context of political transition characterised by uncertainty in identity formation, poverty, inequality, exceptionally high rates of criminality and gender-based violence in particular, and an HIV/AIDS epidemic whose management continues to be marred by official denials, secrecy and stigmatisation.

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