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BOOK REVIEW

Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa. Adam Ashforth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 396 pp.

Five years after the publication of *Madumo: A Man Bewitched*, Ashforth presents us with a more conventional academic text examining spiritual insecurity in Soweto, South Africa.[1] If his general purpose is to "begin reflecting on the implications of the quest for spiritual security in a world of witches for the project of democracy in an African state", the book accomplishes other objectives as well (311). While democratic initiatives and state efforts are addressed in Part III (Spiritual Insecurity and the State), Part I (Soweto) and II (Sources of Spiritual Insecurity) provide rich ethnographic descriptions and analyses valuable in their own right.

 Drawing on extensive research in Soweto, Ashforth begins by describing different dimensions of spiritual insecurity in the township at the turn of the century. Arguing that spiritual insecurity is closely linked to other forms of insecurity (poverty, violence, political oppression and disease, nowadays especially AIDS), he illustrates that there is a "presumption of malice" underpinning township life (69). This observation leads him to develop the notion of "negative *ubuntu*." In his words,a "[t]o the adage 'A person is a person through other people,' the negative corollary of *ubuntu* adds: 'because they can destroy you.' That is, a person can survive only to the extent that others in the community choose *not* to destroy him or her. How they might do so is less important than the fact that they can. And when they do, whether by physical or by occult violence, the demand for justice inevitably arises" (86). Township life is in large part predicated on jealousy, and is motivated by complex relations of power operating alongside 'traditional' norms of reciprocity and kinship. Moreover, witchcraft thrives in a place where recent sociopolitical transitions have differentiated the black middle classes from their poorer counterparts, and where the AIDS pandemic is ravaging the population.

 Ashforth then proceeds to ask what he terms the rationality question—Are people who believe in witches and witchcraft rational?—and the modernity question—Why do people *still* believe in witches? (111). Regarding the first, he writes that in recent years "the interpretation of witchcraft talk as idiom focused more on aspects of modernity, such as colonialism, capitalism, and globalization… While this literature has revealed much about African social life, it suffers from the singular defect… of treating statements that Africans clearly intend as literal, or factual, as if they were meant to be metaphorical or figurative" (114). Ashforth suggests that scholars enrich their analyses by treating witchcraft statements literally. While well-intended, his regular interpellations in the text expressing his own skepticism about witchcraft and his emphasis on the relations between spiritual and other forms of insecurity made this writer wonder to what extent he himself succeeded in this effort. Ashforth then considers the work produced by the 'modernity of witchcraft' school.[2] The problem here, he argues, is that its writers "acknowledge the fallacies embodied in the old ways of distinguishing tradition and modernity" while they continue to "invoke the notion of progress in the guise of a multiplicity of 'modernities'" (117). The author's own inclination is to do away with the concepts of tradition and modernity, though he submits that "ideologies of modernism" and "celebrations of 'modernity'" are "everywhere to be found" (117). I found his analysis here somewhat wanting as well, since he fails to present the reader with an alternative theoretical model.

 Part II of the book concerns people's interpretations of and attempts to manage invisible forces. Ashforth addresses the dialectical properties of *muthi* (literally 'tree,' meaning medicine, poison or herbs) and the ambiguous status of healers, witches and 'African science' in contemporary Soweto. Dangers associated with dirt, pollution, and death are considered, including the latter's significance in light of the AIDS epidemic. The author also describes the 'hosts of invisible beings' and ancestors presence in people's lives. This discussion is illuminating in its contemplation of how Christianity has reconfigured people's interpretations of invisible beings, while the concept of spiritual insecurity adds depth to earlier, resistance-focused examinations of African Christianity.[3]

In Part III Ashforth directs our attention to the implications of witchcraft for democratic governance. While the first parts of the book reveal the multifaceted 'belief complexes' associated with witchcraft, the regularization of persons and elements related to invisible beings and powers (healers, *muthi*) is here shown to complicate matters even more. Ashforth explains how earlier governments failed to deal with witchcraft and 'traditional healing' through the implementation of suppression of witchcraft acts, one of which remains in force in South Africa today. Consequently the ANC has inherited a situation wherein the prevalence of witchcraft must be addressed, while remaining duty-bound to maintain basic human rights and the rule of law. There are no easy solutions to the contradictions thus generated.

In sum, Ashforth's book forms an important contribution to African studies, political science and anthropology, one of its strong points being the author's development of the notion of spiritual insecurity in a world of witches. It will also be of interest to scholars and others working in the medical field, particularly if their work concerns HIV/AIDS in Africa. The discussion on the tensions between contemporary witchcraft and democratic governance forms a good analytical start by laying out current complexities, though it remains to be seen how this matter will work itself out in post-apartheid South Africa.

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NOTES

1. Ashforth, Adam. *Madumo: A Man Bewitched*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
2. See for example Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press (1997); Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders (eds.) *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, London: Routledge (2001).
3. See for example Jean and John Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Volume 1 and Volume 2, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1991 and 1997).