

Riekje Pelgrim. *Witchcraft and Policing: South Africa Police Service Attitudes towards Witchcraft and Witchcraft-Related Crime in the Northern Province.* Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2003. xii + 154 pp. EUR 10.00, paper, ISBN 978-90-5448-056-3.

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This very thorough monograph represents Riekje Pelgrim's prize-winning Master's thesis that was part of a larger joint research program between Utrecht University in the Netherlands and South Africa's University of the North entitled "Crossing Witchcraft Barriers in South Africa." [1] The author was the only non-South African to take part in fieldwork in this research project. She spent a total of six months in the field in the Tshilwavhusiku area of Northern Province in 2001, using participant observation and open-ended interviews as her principal research methods. Attacks on alleged witches have become frequent in South Africa since the mid-1980s, no more so than in the Northern Province which has seen the largest numbers of such attacks, growing dramatically through the 1990s. Yet anthropologists had written little of any depth on witchcraft in the Northern Province since the work of Junod and Krige [2] in the 1930s although, as Pelgrim notes, some mentions of witchcraft beliefs had been tangentially recorded by scholars engaged in the pursuit of other issues in the area.

Pelgrim identified what she calls "this theoretical gap" (p. 2) and positioned her work in relation to what she perceived as three interacting areas of problem: social, legal, and policing. Social problems she identifies as stemming from witch-purging practices, as communities expel, assault or kill witches. This results in numbers of people being

displaced from their familiar social networks, but also in extremes of brutality and in particularly gendered violence, both of which have ongoing effects not just for their victims but also for those who practice them in small village communities. Legal issues on the other hand she identifies as having been caused by Eurocentric anti-witchcraft legislation (in place since the 1950s), which is ambiguous and which, in the hands of the desperate or the unscrupulous, has led to minor family or neighborhood disputes becoming full-fledged legal cases. When it comes to policing, which is Pelgrim's particular focus, she skillfully deconstructs the core problem: that police are both part of the communities within which these allegations are made and reflect long-held beliefs and social understandings, yet are members of that organization of the state which condemns such accusations as criminal and requires its members to uphold the law.

The work is systematically organized, contextualizing the witchcraft accusations first of all in a nested cultural history of South Africa, then Venda, and finally the local area of Tshilwavhusiku in chapters on traditional Tshivenda cosmology and the localized witchcraft discourse, positioning this alongside traditional healing, and exploring the notion of the witch (*moloï*) as a means of understanding that which cannot be understood. Chapter 5 explores the processes and personnel of ac-

cusations, followed by Pelgrim's suggestion that the widespread belief in witchcraft can be understood as what she calls, using Max Marwick's[3] concept, a "social strain gauge" (pp. 59-69). Here she builds on earlier academic analysis suggesting that witchcraft could be seen as a mechanism for social stability; recognizes that more recently scholars have pursued the idea that it could be seen as an indicator of social strain; and explores the recent local political history of apartheid relocations (forcing people into marginal rather than subsistence agriculture), migrant labor, and associated impacts (generational tensions and disturbed traditional gender relations), as well as the substantial changes brought about by massive Christian missionary activity in the area.

At this point, Pelgrim focuses in more narrowly on the South African Police Service (SAPS) in a series of chapters that briefly lay out a history of the SAPS, the changes that the new democratic state brought about (or intended to bring about) in its practices, and the ways in which its members inevitably have had to deal with witchcraft-related issues, not least because of the relationship between those issues and the young Comrades, the youth who perceived themselves as "cleaning up" apartheid society—very often focusing, in the Northern Province at least, on older relatives or members of their communities, and using witchcraft allegations as the mechanism. A useful chapter on the South African witchcraft legislation (and its limitations) is followed by two substantive chapters which explore the types of witchcraft-related crimes (and their prevalence) in the field area and, more interestingly, the beliefs and understandings about witchcraft held by individual SAP members, and the impacts that these personal beliefs (which Pelgrim suggests operate as discourse in their lives, since they are so pervasive) have on their policing practices.

A short conclusion reiterates and refines some of the disturbing conclusions that Pelgrim came to as a consequence of her fieldwork. In par-

ticular, she raises the issue of the dissonance between the external appearance of changes in practices and policies made by the SAPS in the years since 1994 and the inner realities of entrenched positions and views, which operate within the context of legislation that, as Pelgrim found, is considered to be an illegitimate apartheid hangover by most black SAPS members in the area. According to the author, this, combined with the widespread belief within the SAPS that the witchcraft legislation is being misused to promote solutions for private family or village quarrels, does not augur well for a society which, as HIV/AIDS impacts and high rates of unemployment continue to grow, will continue to be subject to intense social strain.

This is an exemplary piece of work by an early career researcher; it is scholarly, well theorized, methodologically sound, neatly conceptualized and clearly written (in what is presumably not the author's first language). While the work is solidly positioned in the African witchcraft literature, I was somewhat surprised not to see reference to and use made of other recent works on witchcraft beliefs in other regions of South Africa, such as those of Clifton Crais or Adam Ashforth, to name but two.[4] Nonetheless, as a local case study it works very well, and if I had had access to it a little earlier I would certainly have assigned it for the undergraduate class on witch hunting which I have recently finished teaching for the year. It will be on the reading list for the next class.

Notes

[1]. The review title comes from a quote by Detective Inspector Malumele in Pelgrim, p. 123.

[2]. Henri Alexandre Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* 2nd ed. rev. (New York: University Books, 1962 [1912]); Eileen J. Krige, *The Realm of a Rain-Queen: A Study of the Pattern of Lovedu Society* (London: International Institute of African Languages & Cultures by Oxford Universi-

ty Press, 1943); Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (London: Longmans, 1936).

[3]. Max Marwick, "Witchcraft as a social strain guage" in Max Marwick (ed.) *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970 [1964]), pp. 280-295.

[4]. Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Adam Ashforth, *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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