

Voice of the bewitched: Implication of the belief in witchcraft in South Africa

[BOOK REVIEW]

Niehaus, Isak (2013) **Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; & London: International African Institute. ISBN 978-1-107-65600-0 pbk. Pages xxiii + 239.

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Despite the rationalism implicit in contemporary thinking, in many parts of the world like South Africa, belief in witchcraft exists and is a core belief, influencing the world-view of many people. In these contexts, witchcraft is believed to be responsible for social experiences including, illnesses, sickness and death. Due to the deeply set belief in witchcraft that has penetrated every sphere of society in South Africa, from politics to sport, witchcraft belief is a prominent feature culminating in fear.

Scholars have studied witchcraft for centuries across the world through various disciplines, providing explanations that focus on different elements of social life like politics, economics, historical conditions and psychological functioning (Parrinder, 1963; Levack, 1995; Ashforth, 2000; Heinemann, 2000). Salmon (1989) for example indicates that historians have conceptualized “witches” as beggars who were turned away by more prosperous community members. These prosperous individuals would accuse the beggar of witchcraft “to salve the conscience or justify the selfishness of those who refused charity” (Salmon, 1989: 484).

Rowlands and Warnier (1988, in Geschiere and Fisiy, 1994) emphasised that sorcery lies at the centre of state-building processes. In a system where one political view is dominant accusations of witchcraft serve as a mode of political action (Niehaus, 1993). In reviewing the explanations put forth, one comes to a realisation that witchcraft accusations may be used as an explanatory framework, for social change, interpersonal conflict and misfortunes, illness and even death.

In his book, **Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa**, Niehaus adds to the understanding provided in the literature (and his previous writings; Niehaus, 1993; 1998), and uses the biography of Jimmy Mohale, an average South African man to demonstrate the centrality of witchcraft belief as it currently functions in South Africa. The reader is immediately drawn into Jimmy's life as Niehaus demonstrates the power of witchcraft belief in the lives of many South Africans.

Niehaus, in the book's frontispiece, quotes Geertz (1973) stating that "over its career religion has probably disturbed men as much as it has cheered them, forced them into a head-on, unblinking confrontation of the fact that they are born to trouble as often as it enabled them to avoid such a confrontation ...". Rightfully so, I think, Niehaus chose this quote as central to the belief in witchcraft, is the belief in religion. Furthermore, he extends this understanding and allows the reader to locate witchcraft belief not only as a function of religion, but as a phenomenon extending into all areas of human life, including politics, illness and interpersonal conflict.

As I read the book, I was drawn into the world of Jimmy Mohale and his experiences that Niehaus analyses. What stands out most prominently is the link between politics, witchcraft, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and power. Niehaus's accounts of Jimmy's life alludes to the main character's perceived lack of power over various situations and circumstances that he faced. For example, in chapter 3 (*Becoming a man*), Niehaus accounts for the financial, academic, interpersonal, cultural and political circumstances that Jimmy lived. In doing so, the reader is able to draw the links between these factors and the centrality of witchcraft belief.

Niehaus states that "Jimmy did not see his own trouble at work as being only structural. He did not blame his lack of progress on the structural violence of apartheid or on the inequities of the post-apartheid situation. Rather, he saw the thwarting of his ambitions as rooted in envy and jealousy in the sphere of interpersonal relations" (p78). And, rather than an acknowledgement of the contextual factors that may have contributed to Jimmy's situation, he further informed Niehaus that "he suspected that the lack of return on his investment in education and in work might have been a result of secret, sinister forces that were somehow blocking his progress" (p78). Evans-Pritchard (1937) and Briggs (2002) tell us that witchcraft beliefs are linked to experiences of misfortune, rivalry and jealousy and that these beliefs can be regarded as an expression of conflict. This indicates that witchcraft beliefs play a role of a social buffer, which removes personal autonomy from misfortune and places this misfortune as stemming from within the social context.

As the main character, Jimmy allows the reader into a world within a world, where malevolence, evil and envy are held responsible for the misfortunes faced by many. The HIV/AIDS pandemic itself has succumbed to witchcraft (Van Dyk, 2001). This was demonstrated by Jimmy, because regardless of how ill he became, he refused to seek medical assistance believing that his suffering was spiritual and not biological. The implication of Jimmy's belief, that his HIV status was linked to witchcraft is far-reaching, as this may represent the belief held by many South Africans. Although one may think that witchcraft belief itself has declined (for, in the Western world, witchcraft accusations have mostly ended) the reality in Africa, and South Africa in particular, is that witchcraft belief continues to influence the thinking and behaviour of many people (Parrinder, 1963; Bornman, van Eeden & Wentzel, 1998). It follows that if witchcraft is believed responsible for HIV/AIDS, the understanding of and treatment thereof will be aligned to such beliefs. The implication posed to the understanding of psychological disturbances can be inferred from Jimmy's understanding of his HIV status. One may question the treatment

options available to those who believe that their psychological ailments are the work of “sinister forces”, as described by Jimmy.

Niehaus’s book, **Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa**, is applicable across a variety of disciplines, as it touches on a multiplicity of factors. I think the book is specifically relevant to practitioners and students in the field of psychology, even though this book is framed within the discipline of anthropology. One of the deeper insights left in my mind after reading the book, was the intersection of religio-cultural belief systems and the predominant biomedical framework employed in psychological practice and education. This understanding and integration is essential, as our treatment and work with clients must become more holistic, being cognisant of the unique characteristics that define illness and health. This will invariably allow practitioners in diverse contexts to locate their training in ways that are reflective of the beliefs that surround them.

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