

## HEROES, VILLAINS AND THE STATE IN SOUTH AFRICA'S WITCHCRAFT ZONE

**Khaukanani N. Mavhungu,**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Univ. of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch Rep. of South Africa

### ABSTRACT

*The witchcraft struggle has divided the black community in the Northern Province into heroes and villains. In this respect, it bears some similarity to the struggle for liberation, which divided the black community in South Africa into those who stood by the liberation movements and those who supported the oppressive system. As in the liberation struggle, neutrality in the witchcraft struggle is unacceptable and is often interpreted as covert support for the status quo. The heroes are those that see themselves as committed to freeing the community from the supernatural evil and liberating people from the attacks of witches. They call themselves comrades – a popular name within the political circles during the struggle for liberation. The villains are those labeled as witches, their relatives, and everyone who is viewed as sympathizing with them. Some studies have suggested that in this witchcraft struggle, the youth who are involved in the attacks on witches are perceived as heroes, while the elderly (especially old women) who are often accused of witchcraft are perceived as villains. This explanation is echoed in the media. But this is too simple. Participation in this witchcraft struggle is not shaped by party-political identification, gender or age, but is influenced by fear – the fear of becoming the next victim of witchcraft, and the fear of being labeled a witch. It seems to me, moreover, that there is another dimension to this pervasive fear. This is that fear can be manipulated: the knowledge that people are afraid of becoming a victim of witchcraft or being labeled a witch opens them to manipulation. This fear and the awareness of fear cut across all members of community political leaders, traditional leaders, traditional healers, church leaders, academics, and members of the police service who are caught up in the witchcraft struggle. Whereas the state was actively involved in the struggle for liberation, in the witchcraft struggle, the state is seen as a passive third party whose alliance is deeply contested by the two parties – heroes and villains. Unlike the previous governments that saw traditional African beliefs and practices as things that were confined to blacks in the homelands, the new democratic government finds itself faced with the need for legislative action on issues related to witchcraft and related practices.*

### INTRODUCTION

**W**hat exactly is witchcraft? How does it manifest itself? Is witchcraft real or superstitious? What or who is a witch? What is the difference between a witch and a medicine man, a diviner, or a witch doctor? How in the world, amid both the harsh treatment that, as a result of being perceived as a witch, one is subjected

to by one's community and the killings of alleged witches in one's community, does one claim the use of witchcraft or implicit threats of witchcraft? What do these threats mean in these communities: is their meaning different from the normal threats we know – that of threatening to kill someone with a gun? What do we make of a naked person in someone's home in the middle of the night? Is it a coincidence that death threats eventually become a reality? How often should this happen, and by whom? What should the post-colonial African governments do about these? By the way, did the missionaries, colonial governments, independent governments make the distinction between a witch, medicine man, witch doctor, and diviner? What is the relationship or distinction between European witchcraft and African? Did the colonial governments mistake one for the other? Did they act as if there were no differences? Were the laws on witchcraft in the Statute books copied wholesale from Indian colonial laws or European laws? Or are they specific for English, French colonies, etc.? Since almost all researchers are Christians, Moslems – believers in heavenly religions, religions hostile to African traditional religion, since almost all researchers are rational educated people, had they not already ranged themselves against all things superstitious? Isn't it African traditional religion believers who can make the necessary distinctions? Or scholars conscious of their biases? Who watches out every time about their biases?

These are all the questions that face African anthropologists as they enter the third millennium. As post-colonial African states, with their colonial legacy, seek appropriate legislation that best address witchcraft beliefs and associated actions, information regarding the ontological status of witchcraft and participants in witchcraft violence in concerned communities will become crucial to decision-makers. For it is with such knowledge that decision-makers can be able to produce solutions that bring witchcraft violence down, and allow state funds to be used on developmental projects in the communities. Anthropologists are best equipped with gathering such information.

With the calls for a strong Africa, trade with Africa rather than aid for Africa, and African Renaissance, the third millennium brings with it new challenges to African anthropologists. Anthropology has been increasingly drawn into the area of development. Given their knowledge of local communities, anthropologists have been relied upon, by both governments and NGOs, for legislative issues and programmes that are aimed at developing the wellbeing of these communities. This is despite the fact that when studying witchcraft, anthropologists concentrate notably upon accusations of witchcraft, relating their tenor and frequency to socio-

political and economic tensions within these communities. As Niehaus (1997:252) showed in his study of Bapedi and Batsonga of the Green Valley, "social and structural tensions by themselves are less accurate predictors of witchcraft attributions and accusations than the literature may lead us to believe. Anthropologists who follow this approach often adopt a reductionist and instrumentalist approach, thus seeing witchcraft as an idiom of social relations and processes, while deeming questions of evidence as peripheral. It is either assumed that proof is impossible, or alternatively, that tension is the only proof of witchcraft".

It is with little surprise that the post-colonial African states have in the last half of this century not been able to deal with issues relating to witchcraft in ways that develop communities. Neither has most research on witchcraft benefited the subject communities in Africa, except to expose them as non-Christian, irrational, backward, and savages that still need to be brought on board the enlightened train of civilization. Surely African anthropologists will need to seriously consider Niehaus' remarks if they are to help post-colonial African states play a more developmental role on issues of witchcraft in the third millennium. They will need to come up with an approach that holds within it the respect for the beliefs which members of these communities have in relation to mystical power. An approach that sees belief in witchcraft as neither irrational nor a resort to explain certain phenomenon, be it modernity or otherwise, but as part of the religious corpus of African beliefs. An approach that acknowledges, as Mbiti (1990:197) argued, that "whatever reality there is concerning witchcraft in the broad and popular sense of the term, the belief in it is there in African [communities], and that belief affects everyone, for better or for worse". It is by employing such a perspective that researchers will be able to unravel that which would have been impossible or deliberately ignored by using reductionist and instrumentalist approaches.

Indeed there are two schools of thought in the area of witchcraft: those who say that witches do not exist, and those who say that witches do exist. In South Africa, this difference of opinion extends to the present system of justice in the courts. Traditional courts agree that witches do exist, whilst formal courts say witches do not exist. On the other hand, to argue for a more participatory approach which is more reflective of the worldview of the communities under study, is not to argue that anthropologists should believe in the reality of witchcraft. Winter (1963), who was regarded as an authority on witchcraft in Africa, once stated that "there is no reason to think that anyone does in fact practice witchcraft or even that anyone could practice it". Later on Lewis (1976), another authority on African societies, declared "I certainly do not believe in witchcraft. I make

this declaration because....we do not need to share other people's beliefs in order to understand them sympathetically: We can see sense in beliefs even when we are convinced they are based on false premises".

As post-colonial African states attempt to address some of the colonial legacies regarding witchcraft, anthropologists will be expected to play a crucial role in such a process. As indicated by Booyesen & Erasmus (1998:229) "the society-wide changes that the country [South Africa] experienced in 1994 provided South Africans with opportunities to reshape both the content and direction of policy. A range of interest groups and associations used the new openness of the post-1994 South African decision-making processes to lobby for policy decisions that directly affected their domain of interest". It is openness like this one in the third millennium when post-colonial African states attempt to deal with issues of witchcraft that will require the attention of anthropologists. For their proposals to be credible and feasible, Anthropologists' advice will need to be informed by the nature of witchcraft in the subject communities, and not by their beliefs with regard to the reality of witchcraft.

Perhaps a better way to capture the challenges that await African anthropologists in the third millennium is to echo Nyamnjoh (1997) who once wrote:

*A writer, I believe, has the moral responsibility as a spokesman for his society, to seek, propagate and defend the truth. He can be likened to the prophet and soothsayer of his society, pricking the consciences of all and trying to correct faults where these are to be found.*

In *Heroes, Villains and the State in South Africa's Witchcraft Zone*, I take this moral responsibility upon my shoulders to put right what has been wronged as a result of avoiding some of the questions I referred to above. I do so by challenging what has become a popular theme in the discourse on witchcraft struggle in the Northern Province: this is the tendency, both in books and in the media, to portray the witchcraft struggle as that which is between the youth (the frustrated and hopeless) and the elderly (especially old women) (Comaroffs, Ralushai, Niehaus).

As in *Ke Bona Boloj*, a drama on witchcraft violence in the Northern Province that is currently showing on SABCTV (South Africa's public broadcasting station), those accused of witchcraft are portrayed as victims of loose gossip, jealousy or as members of the community who are vulnerable and weak (especially the elderly). They are portrayed as victims of social insanity: here the rest of community members are portrayed as irrational human beings that are struggling to make meaning of their sufferings as a result socio-economic changes. The disgruntled,

unemployed, partisan youth are portrayed as the perpetrators of this violence against the elderly, especially old women. Meanwhile, the diviners are portrayed as quacks and charlatans who are central to this witchcraft struggle.

I choose to call it witchcraft struggle because in these communities, belief in the reality of witchcraft is not contestable. There is a popular belief that there are individuals who have access to mystical power which they employ for destructive purposes. This belief instills fear in every member of the community. It thus unites the community [both the youth and elderly] in an eternal struggle to guard against, and whistle any bad use of this mystical power. Once the whistle is blown, there is a need to identify and remove the alleged culprit – a procedure that takes place while the community is still in union. It is therefore a misrepresentation to claim that the community is divided between the youth and the elderly at any stage of this struggle. The community remains united, regardless of any method used to free the community of witches. Hence, the very youth that are portrayed, both in the media and books, as perpetrators of violence are seen as heroes in these communities, while the victims are seen as villains. It is a struggle by the community against the system: the struggle to have the post-colonial South African state and its criminal justice system recognize this form of cultural belief. This is manifested by the setting of kangaroo (informal) courts to sentence witches in these communities. It is surprising kangaroo courts have only got attention in the media just now as a result of other forms of violence prevalent in South Africa.

I argue in this paper that participation in this struggle is influenced by fear – the fear of becoming the next victim of witchcraft, and the fear of being labeled a witch. Not even party-political identification, gender, or age is at play in shaping this struggle. I shall illustrate this with three cases and then make some general observations. These cases are from Venda, the far northern region of the Northern Province. I will start by describing the developments surrounding witchcraft in the Northern Province since 1994, thereby demonstrating that the post-colonial South African state is engaged in the on-going policy-making process that looks at how to best manage the issue of witchcraft.

### **THE NORTHERN PROVINCE**

The Northern Province is one of the nine provinces of the post-colonial South Africa. As the name indicates, this province is in the northern side of the country. Hence, it is referred to as the gateway to the rest of Africa. The Northern Province is bordering Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Pietersburg is the capital city and lies strategically in

the center of the province. The Northern Province occupies the land of 123,919km<sup>2</sup>. It has the fourth largest population of 4,929,368 of South Africa's 40,583,573 inhabitants. This gives the Province 12.1% of the South Africa's population. The Northern Province comprises of three former homelands: Lebowa, Gazankulu and Venda.

In the early 1990s, South Africa witnessed the dramatic escalation of witchcraft-related violence. The Northern Province was most affected by this scourge. More than 485 people were killed as a result of both ritual murders and witchcraft accusations. The Northern Province has since 1994 received around 3000 of reported witchcraft-related cases. Around 300 alleged witches have been killed in the Province since 1994. Today, the Northern Province has five evenly distributed demarcated areas for witches. These are Witches Village (Helena) near Pietersburg, Phola Park in Acornhoek, Matlala Police Station near Vlakfontein, Tshitwi in former Venda area, and Savulani in former Gazankulu area.

When other provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape are preoccupied with crimes such as rape, car hijack and house-breaking, the Northern Province is more concerned with witchcraft-related crime. As an attempt to contain this rampant crime, the provincial government appointed an anti-witchcraft unit, which served as a rapid response unit. In addition, in March 1995 the Executive Council of the Northern Province appointed the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province. The Commission was chaired by Professor N.V. Ralushai, and was later to be known as the Ralushai Commission. As part of its recommendations, the commission felt that the Witchcraft Suppression Act No 3 of 1957 must be repealed and replaced by an appropriate Act that prevents people from using their beliefs to cause harm to others. It also looked into the possibility of appropriate legislation for the control of traditional healers.

As a response to the commission's report, the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa had in 1996 started with a policy-making process that was aimed at recognition and registration of traditional healers. This process was completed in 1998 with the recommendations submitted to the National Health Department for implementation. In September 1998, the Northern Province held the National Conference on Witchcraft Violence. This conference was convened by the Commission on Gender Equality, and aimed at the following:

- Raise national awareness, and find strategies for ending witchcraft-related violence;

- Review and make recommendations regarding the legislation governing witchcraft-related violence, and the handling of such cases by the police and the courts;
- Solicit concrete commitments from stakeholders towards ending witchcraft-related violence;
- Devise strategies for a sustained public education campaign around ending this scourge.

The conference recommended the adoption of a National Plan of Action for Eradicating Witchcraft Violence. It was felt that there was a need for legislative reform: The Witchcraft Suppression Act falls short of a pragmatic approach to the issue of witchcraft, and may in fact be fuelling witchcraft violence. The conference called on the government to repeal the Act and introduce:

- Legislation dealing with the issue of witchcraft, so that those who are engaged in harmful practices can be separated from those who are falsely accused; and so that those who make false accusations can be brought to book. Such legislation would, inter alia;
- Represent a paradigm shift from the current act which operates from a premise that denies the belief in witchcraft; leading to the issue being dealt with outside the criminal justice system.
- Provide clear definitions for words and concepts such as witch and witchcraft;
- Introduce structures to deal with certain witchcraft-related complaints by means of conciliation and mediation, thereby attempting to resolve underlying tensions;
- Legislation to control the practice of traditional healing, which should be accompanied by a code of conduct to ensure that the practice of traditional medicine is separated from sinister practices.

The conference also recommended the adoption of a comprehensive public education and awareness campaign. This included education on witchcraft violence in Curricula 2005, and launching a pilot project in one of the worst affected areas including videos, debates, pamphlets, the media, essays, competitions, etc. from which lessons could be learned and extended to the broader public education campaign. There were other key components that made up the conference recommendations. I have selected these ones on the basis that they are issues of immediate anthropological concern.

From the above, it is evident that the post-colonial South African state is currently involved in an intensive process to find appropriate

solutions to the witchcraft violence that is ravaging the countryside, particularly the Northern Province. Anthropologists, unlike the media, have the moral responsibility to ensure that decision-makers are thoroughly informed of the ontological status of witchcraft in these communities at which legislation is directed. Below are the cases that help to illustrate that there is much more in these communities that are involved in witchcraft struggle than the youth/elderly dichotomy as currently endorsed in the media.

### **WITCHCRAFT RELATED CASES**

With the following cases I intend to show the central role played by the elderly during the process of identifying and killing an alleged witch in the Northern Province. I argue that the youth/elderly dichotomy suggested to dominate this witchcraft struggle is misleading. I also show why it is easy for members of these communities to believe in the reality of witchcraft. I argue that any policy, aimed at curbing witchcraft violence, which does not consider this ontological status of witchcraft in these communities, is destined to fail. It also becomes clear in the paper that contrary to popular belief that they are the perpetrators of this violence, traditional healers, like anyone in these communities, can become victims. Above all, I show the prevalence of witchcraft fear amongst all members of the communities. It is also evident in this case that the post-colonial South African state is deeply engaged in the process of finding solutions on how to deal with the issue of witchcraft.

#### **Case 1: Jim Nephalama, a Strange Animal**

Before 1985, Jim Nephalama is a feared man at Fefe village in the district of Mutale in the former Venda. He is known to be a self-confessed witch. At social gatherings once he has "taken traditional beer up to his throat", he usually boasts that there is no one in the village that has as much power as he does. He often warned his enemies that his war does not get resolved during the day. Most women feared him since he was alleged to have "his own way" of getting them.

In 1985, Naledzani Netshiavha was already a married man who had already built his own kraal next to his brothers in the same village. On 20 September, 1985, Naledzani Netshiavha went to bed at about 21h00. As he was asleep, a scratching sound on the door of his hut woke him and his wife up. He inquired as to who it was but there was no reply. The sound stopped but after some time, it continued again. The couple then became scared.

The couple then woke up and put on their clothes. Naledzani then picked up an axe in the hut and opened the door. As he wanted to walk out, he saw a strange animal that looked like a big bat hanging on the rafters of the roof of his hut. He decided to chop it and then chopped it once and it fell on the ground.

The couple then ran away to Naledzani's elder brother's kraal to seek help. On their way, two strange animals came running past them and ran down the main road. When they arrived there, the elder brother was not home. They took his wife and then went to his other brother whom they found and the four of them took a lantern and proceeded to Naledzani's kraal. When the four arrived at Naledzani's kraal, they found that the thing that Naledzani had chopped was crawling towards the fence of his yard. Naledzani went and chopped it for the second and third times. The strange animal then lay still. The group that had already started shouting for the villagers to come out, then approached to see what kind of an animal it was.

Several people, including the local headman, Nefefe, arrived at the scene and each of them described the animal differently. Some described it as something that looked like a small donkey; some said it looked like a bat, while others just referred to it as "the thing". Naledzani's brother, Gideon Netshiavha, who is a taxi owner, arrived in his taxi and through the lights of his taxi "the thing" was then torched. After a while, a number of people had already gathered and the strange animal turned into a body of a "child with the head of an adult". Later on the body changed into a full body of an adult and that person was then identified as one Jim Nephalama, an old man in his seventies.

The people in the village were shocked but they were not surprised as Jim Nephalama was a reputed wizard in the area and he used to boast that he could do whatever he liked with other people. Naledzani had chopped Nephalama thrice on his head and the blows had caused his death.

What is interesting is that as Gideon Netshiavha was approaching his home in his vehicle, two strange animals started chasing his vehicle and he decided to knock them down. When he alighted to pick them up he found that the big one was a hyena and the smaller one was a genet or polecat. As these animals are associated with the practice of witchcraft, he decided to take them along so that they could be taken to a diviner to see what was going on.

It was sheer coincidence that when he arrived home with the animals, a huge crowd had gathered looking at the other strange animals.

When the matter came before a white judge in the supreme court of the former Venda, the learned judge, with due respect, did not understand the facts before him. As a result of the judge's failure to appreciate the

issues, the judge refused even to listen to the facts and simply came to the conclusion that Naledzani should have realized that it was a human being and that he acted negligently. Naledzani was subsequently convicted of culpable homicide and sentenced to undergo ten years imprisonment.

Mr. Ndou, an advocate, then decided to apply to feed further evidence in the case and to appeal to the Appeal Court in Bloemfontein against this sentence, which was felt to be shockingly inappropriate in the circumstances.

Further evidence was fed and the matter was referred to the Appeal Court. The Appeal Court scrutinized the case very closely and concluded that even though Naledzani might be said to have acted negligently, belief in witchcraft is subjective; and in the circumstances, the sentence imposed by the learned judge was altered from ten to four years imprisonment.

In his judgement, the Appellate Division took the following into account:

Mitigating factors: belief in witchcraft. Although the reasonable man does not believe in witchcraft, a subjective belief therein may be a factor which may, depending on the circumstances, have a material bearing on the accused's blameworthiness – this may be a mitigating factor to be taken into account – held to be a relevant factor in mitigating of sentence for culpable homicide, where belief in witchcraft offered the only explanation for accused's killing of deceased.

As with the white judge of the former Venda Supreme Court, to an outsider incidents of this nature may sound like fiction than reality. People living in the Northern Province can tell an almost endless number of such incidents: people are often caught running away, either naked or partially dressed, from other people's homestead at dawn, people often confess to the use of witchcraft. It is experiences of this mysterious nature that make people in these communities, those who experience them daily, to believe that there are people who have access to mystical power which they employ for destructive purposes. It only takes a single amongst them to realize that the whole psychic atmosphere of these people's life is filled with belief in this mystical power. A visit to one of the traditional African churches in this province can reveal the power that such forces are believed to hold over the lives of human beings. Hardly can there be one Sunday session at Zion Christian Church (a traditional African church based in this province with millions of followers) in which members are not protected by prayers against the attack of the workers of magic. Night vigils are occasionally held during which homesteads are protected by 'holy water' against the attacks of witches. The ZCC even formed its own Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Killings.

This case reveals the puzzling characters of the familiars that are associated with witchcraft. Nephalama first appeared in the form of an

animal, then later as a dead human being. On his way home, Gideon knocked down a hyena and a polecat. Both these animals are wellknown witchcraft familiars in these communities. Beside the fact that it is unknown for any member of the community to possess them, one can never come across them during daylight. It is when understanding the status that they have in these communities that witchcraft familiars can be appreciated and fully explored rather than rushing into attaching to them symbolic meaning of contemporary social and political concerns. On the other hand, Nephalama is a known self-confessed witch in his community. The circumstances surrounding his death, as described in this paper, raises questions to conclusions that people claim to practice witchcraft or using implicit threats of witchcraft, amid both the harsh condemnation a witch is subjected to and the ongoing killing of witches in these communities, in order to maintain some power, protect themselves and to command respect in their communities.

### **Case 2: "After Lightning, the Perpetrator Runs to the River"**

There is a Tshivenda idiom that says *mudiandadzi u fhedza a gidimela mulamboni*. This means that after causing lightning, the perpetrator immediately runs to the river to wash off all the powders. The washing takes place soon after lightning has struck since it is believed the powders could be fatal to the perpetrators should they be left on his body long after the mission had been completed. This urgency in the need to wash off the powders forces perpetrators to urgently land in the nearest river immediately after the act. Perpetrators of lightning do land, since it is believed that they cause lightning while on air even though in another form.

In 1983, Mukona was a businessman who owned taxis. He was staying at Hamudane, a village in the former Venda homeland. His homestead was neighboring those of Ramabulana and Tshilata. Mukona was well respected in the community, despite the fact that he was involved in a taxi dispute with other taxi members in several areas of Venda. It was Friday afternoon and Ramabulana's child Nale was playing outside the mudhouse. There were a number of boys who were seated on the verandah of Mukona's house. It started with just a mere light cloud. Within a short period it was raining heavily with thunders. After a while, Ramabulana's child Nale started screaming to a group of boys who were at Mukona's homestead that there was a crow lingering on the sky, despite the fact that it was raining. When the boys asked where the crow was, he told them it was landing on top of Mukona's mudhut. He told them it could, but is heading to the side on Tshilata's homestead. Nale screamed to the boys that it had landed on top of the mudhut. All of a

sudden there was thunder that was accompanied by lightning, and Tshilata's mudhut was on fire. At this time Nale was screaming that the crow was leaving while the hut was on fire. The crow was heading towards the direction of Nzhelele River. On witnessing the event, the boys alerted the adults, who instead of helping the Tshilata family decided to brave the rain and run towards the river.

On approaching the river, the community members found the naked man standing in the river. On seeing them the naked man opened his armpit, and there the lightning came out. This brought down those who were on the front row. However, members of the community were arriving in large numbers from both sides of the river. The naked man only managed to open his armpit twice with the lightning. The third time nothing came out of his armpits, and there he just kept standing naked in the river. His first words were to ask for calm, not to be killed since he was just doing his job. He told the community members that he was from HaSinthumule – a place that was approximately 100kms away from Hamudane village. One taxi man hired him from his area and that he did not even know any person in the community. His target was Mukona who was alleged to be a problem in the taxi industry. He indicated that while in the vicinity he could not see the homestead of Mukona. He tried to observe several times but to no avail. It was after realizing that he was running out of time that he had to land on Tshilata's homestead. He was very sorry and that he never intended to inflict this harm on Tshilata family. After this confession, one Ntshitsha axed him, as community members looked on. After the incident, the headman called upon an urgent traditional gathering. A resolution was taken that every homestead should contribute R1. Once all the money was collected, the nominated elderly were sent to go find a reputable healer who could tell them if there was more behind the incident and even 'protect' the community against future lightning attacks.

In this case, it becomes evident that not either party-political identification, gender or age, as currently shown in *Ke Bona Boloji* and some literature, are at play. Yes, the kids of around the age of ten who knew nothing about the socio-economic changes that were taking place, spotted the crow. It was only after the incident was reported to the elders, as it has always been the norm in this community, that a certain procedure had to be followed. At the river, given the frequent occurrence of lightning attack, the community decided out of fear of future attacks that the perpetrator should be killed. It should, however, be emphasized that this community was not even politicized like urban areas. It was also unknown for the youth to do anything without the sanction of the elderly in

this community. So, the youth/elderly dichotomy, as suggested both in the media and books, did not exist in this community. It is also interesting to note that Ntshitsha was a family man of 50, whose eldest son was 21.

However, there is another dimension: in cases where a misfortune strikes and it is not clear who the perpetrator is, villagers usually seek a healer to identify a witch or possible witches. After collecting the money, few elderly villagers are nominated to go and visit a healer. This procedure is central to most cases that include the identification and killing of a witch. Unlike in *Ke Bona Boloji* in which it was trivialized, this procedure is handled with respect and delicacy. At the death of a certain member, the community decides that the death is the result of bewitching. They call a traditional meeting and nominate a delegation to visit a healer. They go a distance away because they reason that a distant healer will not falsely accuse a person in their community. The delegation returns and calls a traditional gathering where they reveal the identity of the 'witch'. Then usually all members fired up by the news go immediately to dispense the witch. It is by understanding the central role of the elderly in this procedure that the youth/elderly dichotomy in witchcraft violence becomes very questionable.

This case also serves to explain why people in these communities find it hard to believe that lightning is a natural phenomenon that cannot be manipulated by man to strike enemies. It also shows that besides the natural lightning that they might well be aware of, there are experiences in their lives that make these people believe that there are human beings who are capable of causing lightning to hurt other people. In that case, education programs that are aimed at teaching these people of natural causes of lightning can only manage to alienate them rather than teaching them how to react when such incidents take place. The following fragment from the Commission's Report will serve to indicate the complexities in the lives of the villagers in the Northern Province:

A student at Dinga Village in the Malamulele district was threatened by an old man that he would be struck by lightning on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1995. Lightning indeed struck the hut in which the threatened boy was sleeping. He managed to run out despite the fact that the hut was totally destroyed. On Saturday the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1995, lightning again struck a friend's hut where the same boy had sought refuge. Both managed to escape although the hut was totally destroyed. The following day the community met at the headman's kraal where both incidents were discussed. The name of the old man who had uttered the threat was mentioned. It was decided that the old man should leave the area. The man is now under police protection at Malamulele.

This case is a revelation why witchcraft-related crime in the Northern Province, and not rape, car hijack, and house-breaking as in Gauteng and Western Cape (other South African provinces), is well placed onto the government agenda. It also exposes the shortfalls that were in the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 which concentrated more on the victims of witchcraft accusations. It becomes clear that in these communities threatening someone with lightning is as much a "death threat" as it is to us when threatening to shoot someone with a gun. Indeed, for as much as it is criminal to threaten someone with a gun, it should be sanctioned in these communities to utter such lightning threats. For as much as when someone dies we suddenly suspect the person who threatened the victim with a gun, we then can understand why at one's death, the person who threatened the victim with lightning immediately becomes a suspect in these communities. Such information can be of great value to decision-makers. Importantly, it can also help remove the veil of secrecy on witchcraft practices.

### **Case 3: Teacher Bele the Community Healer**

Bele was a family man of 45, with three daughters. He was a teacher at Ratshitaka High School in Gaza. He was also a well-known traditional healer in his community, Managa village. The local soccer team used to consult him for 'protection' against other teams. His role as a healer was also known at the school.

In 1986, at the beginning of school year, there was a vacancy for the position of a vice-principal at Ratshitaka High School. This was an internal post. Four teachers applied for an interview, including Bele and Dondo. As interviews drew closer two teachers withdrew. The race was left between Bele and Dondo. The interviews were held in March, and Dondo was later appointed as vice-principal. The appointment marked the beginning of acrimonious relationship between the two. It was alleged that Bele never wanted to take orders from Dondo. In May, the two had a heated argument in the staff room, while other members of staff were watching. It is during this time that Bele is alleged to have told Dondo that *u do zwivhona* ('you will see'). This proverb in Tshivenda is said to mean that the fight has not ended as it is resolved, but will continue in other forms. It is usually associated with those who are believed to have access to mystical power. It is an aberration in this community for one to make such remarks. One does so with a clear conscience that the community will hold one accountable for anything that goes wrong to the other person.

In June Dondo fell ill. She kept on complaining that there were things inside her that were causing severe pains as they kept on moving

inside her body. The modern medical practitioners at several hospitals indicated that they could not see anything, despite the fact that Dondo kept on getting thin. Dondo later died on a Sunday afternoon. During Dondo's illness, it was rumored that Bele bewitched her. It was argued that Bele felt humiliated by Dondo's courage to continue with the interview and her actual victory as a woman. On Monday, at a Morning Prayer, the rumor was already circulating amongst pupils.

When the principal announced that Dondo had passed away, students suddenly bade for Bele's blood. They suddenly surrounded him, stoning him, until he was rescued unconsciously by the police who quickly arrived at the scene. This incident marked the end of Bele at Ratshitaka High School.

Several dynamics about witchcraft can be drawn from the above case. First, it shows witchcraft as an explanation of the tension that has been between Bele and Dondo. It also shows, as in the case of lightning, that other teachers might have started spreading the gossip that implicates Bele out of fear of becoming the next victims. However, in this case there is also an element of manipulation of this fear. Teachers might have incited pupils into turning against one of their colleagues. On the surface, it looks as if it is the pupils who are against teacher Bele. But the inside picture shows that pupils are carrying out what their teachers believe in. Such a role played by teachers and students is a reflection of some of the changes in the past years in this domain of witchcraft. Among the Vhavenda, witchcraft accusations had been known to emanate from the relatives of the victim, while traditional courts were the ones to try cases of witchcraft and even could impose sentences. However, the past few years have witnessed the community as a whole being involved in witchcraft accusations and witch killings. This change was partly due to the Witchcraft Suppression Act that stripped traditional leaders of powers to preside over witchcraft cases. Understanding such a background can help decision-makers find appropriate solutions over this problem.

One also finds Bele, a traditional healer, suddenly becoming a suspected witch. By this, the case shows that, like most colonial laws that did not bother to make distinction between a witch, a diviner, a witch doctor, and a medicine man, people in these communities have also lost sense of these distinctions. As these distinctions were deliberately ignored in the Witchcraft Act No 3 of 1957 – a reference to witch doctors was made. Bele suddenly became a witch doctor to his community. It is again this challenge – that of rewriting of history – that African anthropologists face as they enter the third millennium.

## CONCLUSION

This paper shows that, like the rest of Africa, the post-colonial South Africa – in its search for appropriate solution over the issue of witchcraft poses a very serious challenge to African anthropologists. It argues that with their current approaches that tend to overlook the worldview of those communities they study, African anthropologists are falling short of discovering that which the media has found impossible. It is this challenge to find an approach that goes beyond the reductionist and instrumental way of looking at witchcraft accusations – with which African anthropologists enter the third millennium. Such an approach will help Anthropologists offer a more in-depth account of witchcraft in the communities that are usually subjects of their research. This anthropological information can be very helpful to these communities in that it will help decision-makers produce policies that best address witchcraft-related crime that impede development of these communities.

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